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Kiam Parker  
Surviving Broken Dreams:  
A Qualitative Study on the  
Resilience of  
Undocumented Students

## ABSTRACT

The purpose of this qualitative research study is to explore undocumented students perspectives of their experiences on their pathways to accessing higher education--the many obstacles they encounter and their resilience in facing these obstacles to pursue their educations. The complexities of these students experiences—living in the United States undocumented, their process of navigating the American education system and how this shapes how they perceive themselves and their life path--were examined through the narratives of six students who were enrolled in higher education, or planning to attend.

The findings of this research showed that the unique psychosocial stressors undocumented students face--poverty, invisibility, isolation stigma, inadequate preparation for college, limited employment opportunities, and lack of awareness and recognition of their status by educators--posed as risk factors for short term mental health issues and decreased the propensity of attaining higher education. Social support from family and friends, connection with a trusted and knowledgeable teacher or counselor and participation in social activism were primary determinants of resiliency for these students.

Implications of this study include suggestions on programs, policies and services that students, educators, social workers and government officials can implement to better meet the needs of the undocumented population and help them advance to higher education.

**SURVIVING BROKEN DREAMS:**  
**A QUALITATIVE STUDY ON THE RESILIENCE**  
**OF UNDOCUMENTED STUDENTS**

A project based upon an independent investigation,  
submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements  
for the degree of Master of Social Work.

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2012

## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

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This is dedicated to all undocumented students; I am inspired by your resiliency, strength and dedication to social justice—Thank you.

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## **CHAPTER I**

### **Introduction**

The purpose of this research study is to give voice to the lived experience of undocumented students in order to capture their perception of the struggles they face and strengths they use to navigate the American education system in their quest for higher education. In this study, two central questions were explored: 1. What unique barriers do undocumented students face due to their status? 2. What factors influence the resiliency of students to overcome or adapt to these obstacles? According to Gildersleve (2010), 50-60 thousand undocumented students graduate from high school each year and only 7-13 thousand attend college; this means they enroll at a rate of 5-10 percent compared to the 66 percent national average (p.5). Gonzalez (2009) wrote:

A sizable number of children are growing up and being schooled in the United States without the ability to realize their dreams and actualize their education. Contradictions in our laws have created a vulnerable subset in our population — children who have been raised to dream, yet are cut off from the very mechanisms that allow them to achieve their dreams. These children account for 15 percent, of all undocumented immigrants now living in this country. (p. 6)

What are the implications of such exclusion on individuals and society? What effect does it have on the students psychologically? This study used the narratives of six undocumented

students who have graduated high school and have dreams of attending higher education to explore these questions. This study is a qualitative research design and used open-ended interview questions to gather narrative data from the students. This study examines the firsthand experiences, perspectives and insights of how undocumented students are coping when faced with the barriers that make pursuing higher education such a challenge, such as: current laws and policies that prohibit citizenship and access to other resources (financial aid, drivers license, legal employment), stigma and stereotypes, poverty, lack of information in the school system, and racism. In addition, this study investigates the factors that helped students remain resilient in the face of these barriers such as: family support, social networks, values, social activism and the schools responsiveness to their situations.

Impetus for this research study comes from my strong personal belief that undocumented students are being denied opportunities to excel in their lives for reasons that are unjust. After speaking with many undocumented students, I learned of the common themes in their stories: typically, they came into this country as children with their parents who fled from extreme poverty, and sometimes violence, and migrated to the United States in order to improve circumstances for their families. Most students facing the hardships of immigrating and living in the United States without documentation struggle, but I found some had found positive ways to cope in their current environment. The students I spoke with wanted desperately to attend college, pursue their dreams and contribute to the country they consider home. Unfortunately, due to the current laws and attitudes around immigration in the United States, they were left with the difficult dilemma of wanting to excel in higher education but not having the pathway to do this. The repercussions of such limitations can negatively affect a student for the rest of their

lives.

Another motivating factor for this research study are that the voices of undocumented students have largely gone unheard. As Paris (2008) pointed out, a number of studies describe aspects of the experiences of immigrant women and children, but little is known about the daily lives of immigrants, especially the unique experience of undocumented students. Although there is an ample body of research that discusses the systemic barriers students face and argues for policy change there is limited research on how these students cope on a daily basis. Additionally, there is less focus in the research on understanding the individual reactions and behavioral outcomes for these students; issues that are captured and presented in this research by using narrative data.

An important aspect of studying this topic is it's emergence as a salient social justice issue. Current policies prohibit undocumented students from partaking in the same opportunities as students born in the United States. Presently, proposed legislature on the federal and state level are pending, that if passed would provide a pathway to permanent citizenship; allowing students to go to college, join the armed forces, vote, get a drivers license and access the many privileges citizenship provides.

As it stands, current immigration policies undermine the lives of undocumented students. Currently, the K-12 school system uses a one size fits all method to prepare students for higher education. Unfortunately this has devastating consequences for the undocumented student. Upon applying for college admittance and scholarships, undocumented students find their lack of residency can drastically increase tuition costs, disqualify them for scholarships, deny them access to any Federal Student Aid (known as FAFSA), bars them from voting, prevents them



from working legally and in most states denies them access to a drivers license. Consequently, without access to a college education, students feel deflated and instead of earning a degree and pursuing a career, they end up limited to underachieving jobs and a host of other consequences including dropping out of high school. Having been led on the path of opportunity only to have the door close can leave a lifelong impression of loss on these students. Giving voice to the experience of undocumented students through research allows their voice to be heard and their issues to be taken seriously – with a hope of giving power back to the students whose futures depend upon changing immigration policy and attitudes around immigration in the United States.

Unfortunately, as a whole, very little research has been done on undocumented students although they make up a considerable percentage of the population and this number continues to grow. As an example, Paris (2008) points out that immigrant women have been arriving in the United States in increasing numbers since the 1980s in search of employment. She also points out that migration itself is a survival strategy given the conditions of their home countries. Given current immigration policy in the USA, many are forced to arrive undocumented leaving them in vulnerable positions and fearful of authorities. This problem continues to haunt undocumented students as they face the daunting task of considering college without a social security number or ID card and without the ability to apply for financial aid; all compounded by the real risk that exposing their identities could pose. The bottom line is: if their information is reported, they or their families could face deportation—thus the decision to pursue higher education becomes more complex when faced with the weight of this realization. When considering these challenges, it's also important to point out the inequity in students (minors) being held accountable for the decisions of their parents to immigrate (illegally) when

most were at an age where they had no choice about coming.

These are overwhelming issues not only for the individual student but also for educators supporting them and helping them prepare for college in their K-12 education. It will take large-scale policy interventions to improve the rights of these students and their families. As evidenced by the attention immigration policy gets in congress and in the media, it is an emergent and urgent issue America faces. Unfortunately, voters and congress alike rely heavily on second hand knowledge, anecdotal evidence, and sound bites to form their opinions. More empirical evidence is needed, particularly firsthand accounts of those persons living as undocumented, to encourage voters and political representatives to make informed choices around this issue.

This study will explore the myriad of layers this topic spans beginning with a comprehensive literature review, followed by the findings—based on the narratives of the six undocumented students interviewed who intimately shared their stories, including their perspectives, and insight on how they were able to cope as they navigated the American education system.

## **CHAPTER II**

### **Literature Review**

The purpose of this study is to explore the experience of undocumented students on their pathways to accessing higher education-the many obstacles they encounter and their resilience in facing these obstacles to pursue their educations. To gain an understanding of the complexities that can arise for undocumented students in their attempts to access and complete higher education, this review of literature examines their experiences from a historical, political, systemic and psychological perspective.

The literature review is divided into two main sections; 1) the barriers undocumented students face in accessing higher education 2) the resilience of undocumented students in responding to these barriers. Section one provides an overview of the circumstances surrounding many undocumented students, a look at the history of immigration and immigration law and current policy (including federal and state laws) affecting undocumented students. I also examine the potential risk factors for students due to their undocumented status such as: trauma from the immigration journey, poverty, low self-esteem, unprepared K-12 schools and higher education institutions, limited financial resources, stigma, and racism. Section two explores resiliency in the context of undocumented students pursuing and thriving in higher education. This section focuses on protective factors (close supportive relationships, exposure to opportunities and resources) as well as the potential positive influence of the undocumented students' rights movement.

For the purpose of this study an undocumented student is defined as someone who: is not legally able to obtain citizenship, is living as a long term resident in the United States, entered the United States illegally as a child—and--is in high school, has graduated from high school or obtained a General Education Degree and is interested or planning to attend college or a higher education institution, or is currently attending higher education.

### **The Undocumented Students' Experience in Facing the Barriers to Higher Education**

**Who are undocumented students?** Approximately 65,000 undocumented students in the United States graduate from high school each year and only 7,000-13,000 attend college; this means they enroll at a rate of 5-10 percent compared to the 66 percent on average at the national level (Gildersleve, 2010, p.5). There are an estimated 2.1 million undocumented children and young adults in the United States; as immigration to the United States continues, these numbers are estimated to increase (Immigration Policy Center [IPC], 2010). About 56 percent of all undocumented immigrants are from Mexico, 22 percent from other nations in Latin America, 13 percent from Asia, 6 percent from Europe and Canada, and 3 percent from Africa and other regions of the world.

The United States (US) public school system provides an education for these students through grade 12 (College Board, 2012) and federal laws do not prevent undocumented students from entering colleges and universities. However, the College Board research reports that institutional policies on admitting undocumented students vary depending on the school. Also, many undocumented students can't afford to attend college because they do not qualify for federal and state financial aid, many scholarships, and most federally financed programs (College Board, 2012). Even after successfully completing their degrees, undocumented

students cannot legally work, unlike their native born peers. As much of the research points to, because of the barriers and complications that arise without a means to legalize their status, many students can't attend post-secondary education. Many of these students have spent the majority of their lives in the United States, are encouraged at home and in school, and have high aspirations similar to their American born friends and classmates. According to Gonzalez (2009):

They are honor roll students, athletes, class presidents, valedictorians, and aspiring teachers, engineers, and doctors. Yet, because of their immigration status, their day-to-day lives are severely restricted and their futures are uncertain. (p.8).

Undocumented students belong to what the literature refers to as the 1.5 generation—any (first generation) immigrants brought to the United States at a young age who were largely raised in this country and therefore share much in common with second-generation American Immigrants (IPC, 2010). The majority of undocumented students are brought into the United States by their parents or other relatives therefore they did not make the decision to come (College Spark, 2010). Since most of these students grow up in the United States they are “culturally American” and have little attachments to the countries they were born in. As Gonzalez (2010) pointed out, some may not even know they are undocumented until they apply for a drivers license or begin college preparation, yet “...at any time, these young men and women can be, and sometimes are, deported to countries they barely know.” (p. 1).

In addition to facing the prospect of being deported at any time, undocumented students can't legally drive (in most states), work, vote or join the military (IPC, 2011). Despite growing up in the United States, they are denied many of the rights American born citizens take for

granted. Currently there is no legal path to citizenship for these students or their undocumented family members. Since the only option for these families is to work illegally they are vulnerable to poverty. The research showed that almost 40 percent of undocumented families' with children incomes are below the federal poverty line, compared to 17 percent documented families with children. Also, the average income of undocumented immigrant families is 40 percent lower than both their native-born and legal-immigrant counterparts (Gonzalez, 2009).

The voices of undocumented students have largely gone unheard, however, over the past few years, many have taken matters in to their own hands, taking the courageous step to “come out” (a movement growing among undocumented students, declaring their status as a political act [Rojas, 2012]). The increasing numbers of students who are undocumented, the limitations in current policy at both the state and federal level and the growing movement to change such policies has brought the issue of undocumented students' rights to access higher education into the media spotlight. Many articles covering this movement quote undocumented students who choose to make their voices known and bring their opinions to the public. In an article in the Seattle Times, an undocumented high school senior with a 3.8 GPA in Washington State, who has dreams to attend college and is currently trying to find the means to finance her secondary education said, “I know there's a possibility I may not be able to go. I want to look back and say...at least I tried.” (2012, A7). In an article published by Indy Bay (a San Francisco Bay Area Independent Media Center), a student activist participating in a hunger strike, to raise public awareness on the dilemma facing undocumented students, declared, “After fourteen years of being in the shadows, you reach a point where you say, I don't care, I'm fighting for what's right.” (2012, p.1)

**The history of immigration and immigration policy.** Comprehensive knowledge of the issue of undocumented students accessing higher education requires an understanding of the turbulent social, historical and political context it's embedded in. The United States was created over the past three centuries by waves of immigration from all over the world. The first wave came mainly from Northeastern Europe but also included African slaves, later in the late 1800s many immigrated from Southeastern Europe and since the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century a growing number are of Latin American, Asian and African decent (IPC, 2012). Research on the history of immigration (Schrag, 2010; IPC, 2012; IPC 2010) shows how public attitude and politics towards immigrants have ranged from, welcoming, to ambivalent, to contradictory to hostile. Nativism, xenophobia and racism are common responses to immigration. Schrag (2010) honed in on this noting that immigrants who are demeaned and denied equal rights by one generation often make the same claims against new waves of immigrants in the next generation.

Policies governing the treatment of immigrants seem to reflect the changes in public attitude. "Who belongs here? What does the economy need?" (IPC, 2012) are questions central to the past and current debate on immigration reform and will likely shape the future of immigrants, including undocumented students. As the history of immigration shows, depending on the state of the nation, federal responses to these questions of belonging have ranged from actively recruiting immigrants to shutting them out and deporting them. Much of the political debate and change in policy towards immigration reform stems from the 14<sup>th</sup> amendment to the United States Constitution, the first laws formally defining citizenship designed to protect citizens civil and political rights. Yet, as we can see, the lack of clarity around who is actually fit to be an American continues to create contention in the interpretation and application of

citizenship laws, laws that are keeping undocumented students in limbo.

***Immigration policy 1986-present.*** In 1986 comprehensive immigration reform called the Immigration Reform and Control Act (IRCA) was passed. The act legalized undocumented people who had resided in the United States prior to 1982, prohibited employers from hiring people unauthorized to work in the United States and allowed for the legalization of certain temporary agricultural workers (Federation For American Immigration Reform [FAIR], 2008). The Immigration Act of 1990 focused on numerical limits and a preference system regulating permanent legal immigration (FAIR, 2008). The 1996 Illegal Immigration Reform and Immigrant Responsibility Act (IIRIRA) increased penalties against illegal immigration, streamlined the deportation process, and increased border patrol essentially making it much harder for people to enter the country illegally or gain legal citizenship after arriving (FAIR, 2008). Section 505 of the IIRIRA specifically prohibits states from providing any higher education benefit based on residency to undocumented immigrants unless they provide the same benefit to U.S. citizens in the same circumstances (IPC, 2010).

***Legal contradictions.*** Current laws around education and immigration send contradictory messages to undocumented students. 30 years ago, the Supreme Court ruled in Plyer v. Doe (1982) that undocumented children are "persons" under the constitution and thus entitled to equal protection under the law according to the 14th Amendment. The court held that states therefore may not discriminate against them on the basis of their legal status in the provision of public elementary and secondary school education (Olivas, 2005). As Gonzalez (2006) pointed out, this has led to thousands of undocumented students graduating from high school each year. Nevertheless, the limitations imposed by their lack of legal residency increase



the barriers they face after graduating, such as sky high tuition rates, and no way to enter the workforce legally. These barriers discourage most of these students from continuing their education. The research suggests (Gonzalez, 2006; Passel, 2006; and IPC, 2010) that this has been a leading cause of high dropout rates, low graduation rates and low attendance in post-secondary education; only 5-10 percent of undocumented students who do graduate actually go on to college (Passel, 2006).

The introduction of the Development, Relief, and Education for Alien Minors Act (DREAM) Act, in 2001 to the US congress provided an opportunity for these high-school graduates to continue their education and become US citizens. The DREAM Act addresses the desire of undocumented immigrants growing up in the United States who wish to go to college and obtain lawful employment. The bill allows current, former, and future undocumented high-school graduates and GED recipients (up to age 30) a pathway to U.S. citizenship through completing college or serving in the armed services. The DREAM Act has come up for vote several times since 2001, most recently in 2010 yet has not passed (IPC, 2010). Unfortunately, in the process crushing the dreams of many students who put their energy and hope into passing the DREAM Act.

***Discrepancies between federal and state laws.*** While states can't legalize the status of undocumented students, they may allow for undocumented students to qualify for in state tuition rates (College Board, 2012). Section 505 of the Illegal Immigration Reform and Immigrant Responsibility Act of 1996 (IIRIRA) prohibits states from providing any higher education benefit based on residency to undocumented immigrants unless they provide the same benefit to U.S. citizens in the same circumstances (dream activist, 2009). Since 2001, to help

undocumented students afford to attend college, thirteen states have passed laws that provide in-state tuition for undocumented students: California, Illinois, Kansas, Maryland, Nebraska, New Mexico, New York, Texas, Utah, Washington, Oklahoma, Connecticut and Wisconsin (which has since revoked the law). Whereas six states in the past 6 years have actually passed laws barring undocumented students from receiving in state tuition including: Arizona, Colorado, Georgia, Indiana, South Carolina and Alabama (Higher Education Access Alliance, 2012).

The laws in the states providing in state tuition require undocumented students to: “(1) attend a school in the state for a certain number of years; (2) graduate from high school in the state; and (3) sign an affidavit stating that they will apply to legalize their status as soon as they are eligible to do so.” (IPC, 2010). Nine other states (Colorado, Connecticut, Florida, Iowa, Massachusetts, Mississippi, Missouri, Oregon, and Rhode Island) considered similar legislation in 2011. These laws are in compliance with federal law (section 505 of IIRIRA) because these states also provide U.S. citizens who meet these requirements, but who no longer live in the state, the option to qualify for in-state tuition rates as well.

The effect of offering in-state tuition, however, is limited without the chance to receive financial aid. Three of these 12 states, California, New Mexico and Texas, currently allow undocumented students to receive state financial aid (HEAA, 2012). Undocumented students who are accepted to post-secondary schools in the other thirty-eight states, face substantial financial barriers as they are required to pay out-of-state tuition at public colleges and universities, at more than 140 percent of resident tuition and have no access to state or federal financial aid (Gonzalez, 2009). For example, in Colorado, where legislation called the Asset Act to offer Undocumented students close to instate tuition is currently pending, at the University of

Colorado Boulder, in state tuition rates are set at \$9,152 per year whereas out of state tuition is \$30,330 (Higher Education Access Alliance, 2012). Not to mention the additional costs of housing, transportation and food. These high costs are exacerbated by the limited jobs available to these students who are not able to work legally in the United States.

Unfortunately while some states have passed and proposed laws and policies that help undocumented people, other states have proposed a wide range of anti-immigration legislation. For example, Alabama's state board of education passed a law denying undocumented students admission to state two-year colleges (Gonzalez, 2006). The many laws and policies presented in this literature review, expose a confusing, disjointed and inconsistent system; a system undocumented students must understand to navigate their way to (and through) higher education. Gonzalez (2006) articulates the need for federal reform to address these legal inconsistencies, "The recent confusion about state policies and local decisions points to a need for a more encompassing federal policy," since he wrote this no federal policies have passed. Meanwhile, many undocumented students are left in limbo, without the means to lift themselves out of poverty.

***The current social and political climate.*** Public attitudes and politics towards immigrants have shifted over time. Presently, there seems to be an exclusionary stance in the mainstream society toward immigrants and immigration issues. Many popular myths exist in American society about immigration. For example, people expressed anti-immigration sentiment, in their anonymous comments to the online Newsday article, "Undocumented Students Push for 'Dream Act'," they commented, "Why do we want this? What about our legal taxpaying citizens? Maybe I'll get a third job so I can afford the tuition for the illegals!"... "Send

them back where they came from”... “They can't work here because they don't have a right to be here.”... “Undocumented? You mean illegal.” ...“Round 'em up and ship 'em out.” These kind of popular comments highlight the general negative feelings about immigration. They also demonstrate the dire need to continue research that will facilitate attitudes of understanding and acceptance informed by the realities of the daily struggles undocumented students cope with.

**External and internal barriers to higher education.** Without a means to legalize their status, undocumented students are seldom able to attend college, imposing significant financial as well as emotional costs. The current system sends mixed messages to students that may discourage them from even trying. The article *Defined by Limitations* (Arriola & Murphy, 2010) addresses how students internalize messages that are explicitly or implicitly negative. They show how the legal restrictions for undocumented students can lead to internalized limitations. For example, conflicting messages for students from the K-12 school system which asks them to “believe in the power of education to change their circumstances” but then won’t support them legally or financially in realizing this dream past high school (Arriola & Murphy, 2010, p. 27). “Contradictions in our laws have created a vulnerable subset in our population — children who have been raised to dream, yet are cut off from the very mechanisms that allow them to achieve their dreams.” (Gonzalez, 2009, p. 6).

So what happens to these students? According to the research (Chan, 2010; Gonzalez 2009), tens of thousands graduate from high school motivated to succeed and are academically prepared to move forward with their educations yet only a small percentage of these students are actually able to do this. For many others, the legal restrictions and other barriers cause them to give up and drop out before high school graduation.

According to College Spark (2010), the experience of being undocumented can change the way students see themselves. This could be influenced by a traumatic event or the everyday realities of living in this country undocumented. Some students are haunted by painful and scary memories of their experience immigrating into the United States (College Spark, 2010). This process involves upsetting events like separating from loved ones and leaving a familiar place to face the unknown. It is also more common that violence goes unreported due to fear of their legal status being exposed to the police or other authorities (College Spark, 2010). This fear may also leave undocumented students to face the confusion and pain of divorce, death or other traumatic events in their lives alone.

The research (Kao and Tienda, 1995; Paris, 2008) describes the many hazards immigration holds for people. All people who immigrate (documented or undocumented) face the hardships of adjusting to a new life after immigrating to the United States: finding a home, creating new social networks, and pursuing education or employment within an unfamiliar environment. Paris (2008) interviewed mothers who were undocumented; the women's collective stories paint a bleak picture of pain and desperation, in their immigration process. They speak of their initial entries into the United States and the challenges of adapting to changes in the family system—redefining roles and re-negotiating expectations and division of household responsibilities—financial stress and the difficulty of dealing with strong emotional reactions due to the stress of the immigration journey.

Whether or not undocumented students can recall their actual immigration journey, factors confronting undocumented students and their families during this process may continue to cause distress in their family systems due to the inability to resolve many of these stressors.

The effect of these combined issues is compounded for the undocumented population (Kao & Tienda, 1995). These risk factors form a backdrop of struggle for undocumented students who are then navigating entry into higher education and facing even more obstacles. In order to better serve these students, there needs to be a multi-dimensional approach in assessing both their current level of functioning and their needs as students, both in the school, in the family system and within the community in which they are living.

Baum & Flores (2011) study the challenges in the education system for specific ethnic immigrant populations, finding poverty to be a leading factor in low post secondary school attendance. They report that college attendance for students who are considered low-income persons and whose parents had no college experience was low. Although this article did not delineate undocumented students, the IPC (2011) reported that 40 percent of undocumented families' with children incomes are below the federal poverty line, compared to 17 percent of documented families with children. Also, the average income of undocumented immigrant families is 40 percent lower than both their native-born and legal-immigrant counterparts. Thus placing undocumented students at a high risk for not pursuing post-secondary education when correlated with the Baum & Flores article. Additional financial burdens to support such an endeavor are placed on the undocumented population due to the fact that the majority of states require undocumented students to pay out of state tuition rates and they can't qualify for financial aid.

It is a challenge for schools, and communities, to assess and support the needs of these students—and their families--as many are in positions where they have to keep their full identities hidden in order to protect themselves. Many do not share their status based on fear of

deportation or being treated differently (College board, 2010). A report from College Board (2010) included interviews from undocumented students who stressed how different they felt when their friends began applying for college. “They felt left out, discouraged, angry, and isolated. Being referred to as “undocumented,” “illegal,” or “alien” creates separation from their peers.” (p. 9). Living in constant fear and remaining invisible or feeling different takes a toll on students that is reflected in their academic performance but the impact on their self-worth and the way they see themselves in the world may be difficult to capture with statistics.

The reality is that current laws prevent undocumented students from working legally regardless of their education level. The shame, invisibility, stigma and fear that often accompany this reality can lead to undocumented students losing hope. According to the research few (if any) support groups exist to help undocumented students get through these painful experiences (College Board, 2010). Further, many school counselors and teachers are often unaware that some students are undocumented or uninformed about what this means and what they can do to help. Unfortunately, according to the research (Gonzalez, 2006; Passel, 2006; and IPC, 2010), this results in many students not receiving the information and support they need, and for some leads to giving up and dropping out of school. Although specific statistics were not found, research reported that barriers undocumented students face due to their status has been a leading cause of high dropout rates, low graduation rates and low attendance in post-secondary education. They also report that undocumented students drop out of school and do not attend higher education at disproportionately high rates compared to students who are documented.

***Limited awareness in K-12 education.*** Academic advisors, counselors and teachers have a responsibility to provide students with information about their post-secondary educations.

However, legally, K-12 counselors and teachers cannot inquire about the immigration status of students or their parents (College Board, 2012). Therefore, they may only learn a student is undocumented if he or she chooses to share this information. Furthermore, College Board (2012) reported that some students might not even be aware of their legal status. Due to this disconnect, information may not be clearly communicated about what options are available. Undocumented students may make the assumption, for instance, that they can't even attend college, although there is no federal or state law prohibiting students from entering college nor does federal law require students to provide proof of citizenship to enter institutes of higher learning (College Board, 2012). However, as the research indicates, institutional policies on admitting undocumented students vary; complicating the understanding (for students and education staff) on what post-secondary options are available.

For example, College Board (2012) reported that many 4-year state colleges in Virginia (following a 2003 recommendation by the state attorney general) require applicants to submit proof of citizenship or legal residency, and refuse admission to students without documentation. They note, however, that this policy is not a state law. In many states, public institutes of higher education do accept undocumented students but they remain ineligible for state financial aid and in state tuition rates charged to residents. These complicated and conflicting laws and policies may make it even more challenging for school staff to obtain accurate information and use it to educate students.

College Spark (2010) interviewed individuals who suggested several possible reasons why the disconnect in communication between undocumented students and school staff exist including the idea that over worked counselors and advisors diminish the time their available to



provide individual guidance, the most likely place a student might open up about their situation. They also reported that academic advisors lacked the training and resources to support undocumented students in their higher education pursuits. Many students, teachers and counselors are not aware what options are available and few printed materials exist to help guide them. Although, there are staffs at colleges and universities who are knowledgeable and willing to support undocumented students, there is no clear path to connect them with each other (College Board, 2010). The research portrays how many undocumented students remain alone in navigating a complicated and confusing education system. In order to help these students meet their education goals, educators need to be trained on how to reach out to these students without violating their rights or privacy, and they need to be informed of the resources that are available for students in this position to access.

Since many students feel alone in their situations, there is a need for role models to be mentors for students who have been in similar situations and been successful despite these hardships (College Spark, 2010). For undocumented students finding a role model is difficult. Since legal status is necessary to work at schools they will not be able to find adults who are undocumented there. Older students can be role models but as the statistics show there are few who make it to higher education. Additionally the same fear that exists for undocumented students in talking about their status may prevent older students from talking openly to younger students.

For those undocumented students who do make it to higher education additional barriers may exist for them. In addition to the challenges of adjusting and taking on new responsibilities that all college students face, the research (College Board, 2012 and College Spark 2010)

describes barriers particular to undocumented students. As in K-12 education, undocumented students may not know where to turn to get support and guidance. Most schools do not provide information on people undocumented students can get into contact with who are knowledgeable about their situations. College Board (2012) found that few groups exist on college campuses that are specific to the issues of undocumented students. Also, students may continue to remain hesitant to share their status because they aren't sure whom to trust.

***Undocumented students and racism.*** The majority of undocumented students fall into categories of racial minority making them vulnerable to the compounding negative effects of racism. So, what additional risk factors does race impose and what do they look like?

Kao and Tienda (1995) begin to address this in their findings of race as a causal factor for educational performance for immigrant (documented or undocumented) youth. They report that Black and Hispanic youth grades were below those achieved by White students, whereas Asian students' grades were comparable to White students. Significantly they report that "immigration status (referring to being a first, second or third generation immigrant) had almost no discernible consequence for White students," (p. 17).

Similarly, Koyama (2007) examined how forces of oppression operate through the school system and impact people in minority positions, finding that marginalized populations were far less likely to engage in school and attend college due to institutionalized discriminatory practices, policies and ideologies. The research shows that minority populations often continue to experience discriminatory practices in the workforce, which may further disillusion students as they face the prospect of entering such an environment after graduation, ultimately decreasing the motivation to perform academically (Kao & Tienda, 1995). The articles mentioned did not

specifically address undocumented students and one author noted in his findings that more research should be done in this area (Koyama, 2007).

Several articles specifically explore the damaging affects race can have for certain populations of undocumented students. Chan (2010) describes how undocumented youth who are White, are protected from negative stereotypes (due to their race) and yet remain isolated in grappling with their status because they are less visible. A College Board report discussed how the stereotype of Asian American and Pacific Islander (AAPI) undocumented students, in the United States, as the model minority can result in negative effects, “The report further asserts that this focus on the model minority’s success has resulted in a lack of scholarship that addresses low achievement among AAPI students; prevented counselors, teachers and policymakers from understanding the difficulties and problems of these students; and ultimately led to neglect of programs and services for these students” (Gonzalez, 2009, p. 10). Chan and Gonzalez’s articles serve as a reminder to question how race and ethnicity impact both resiliency and risk for undocumented youth.

Gallo, Penedo, de los Monteros, and Arguelles (2009) describes the adverse risks of racism suffered by the overall Hispanic population of immigrants, such as social marginalization, poor living environments, and dangerous and/or low paying employment; being undocumented further compounds these adversities by adding the pressures of fear of deportation and increased struggles with residential and financial stability. Their research shows the serious, significant and wide spread impact racism has on students who are undocumented; however, there was limited information on the specific emotional toll and behavioral outcomes for both the individual student and his or her family or loved ones. Also, the research does not elaborate on

the many forms of institutionalized racism (that exist outside of the school system) that undocumented people of color disproportionately face.

Inherent in the fact that people are living in the United States “illegally” they do not have access to the same legal protections and rights that citizens have; they may avoid going to any sort of authority due to the fear of their documentation status being discovered. The grave reality for undocumented students and their families who experience prejudice or discrimination is that they are forced to live and work side by side with their perpetrators; remaining vulnerable to ongoing abuse. Unfortunately these sorts of abuses may come from the very institutions and people they are supposed to be able to depend on for their safety and to protect their livelihood. Perhaps their documentation status itself makes such research difficult to capture as many of the crimes undocumented people may suffer likely go unreported.

### **Remaining Resilient in the Face of Adversity**

“A significant proportion of undocumented students have navigated our K-12 schools successfully despite the challenges of migration and discrimination — in addition to the typical difficulties faced by all adolescents. Many have the academic preparation to pursue a postsecondary education, but their economic and social mobility is severely restricted by their undocumented status.” (Gonzalez, 2009, p. 5) Despite many systemic barriers, prejudice, and living with disproportionate rates of poverty some of these students are thriving in their lives, pursuing education and careers, and determined to succeed even without the prospect of using their degrees for future employment. How are some students able to endure with a degree of resilience when faced with experiences that place them at a high risk for losing hope, shutting down and dropping out? The remainder of this review of literature explores this question,

focusing on the development of resiliency in undocumented students who attend or pursue higher education and the protective factors contributing to their success.

What is resiliency and where does it come from for undocumented students? Drawing from the broader conclusions in *What is resilience?* (Herrman, Stewart, Diaz-Granados, Berger, Jackson, & Yuen, 2011) helped create a working definition in the context of this topic to begin exploring these questions. “Definitions have evolved over time but fundamentally resilience is understood as referring to positive adaptation, or the ability to maintain or regain mental health, despite experiencing adversity.” (p. 259). For undocumented students, this means the ability to survive, thrive and pursue their educations despite the adversities faced. Informed by these universal concepts, this research project examines resiliency in undocumented students by conceptualizing it as a dynamic process between personal experiences with social circumstances, culture, and the political environment. Given the intricate interplay this implies between the individual, their environment and their ability to adapt to and overcome adversity, this process can be best understood from the individual’s perspective as this research project proposes.

Herman, et al., (2011) attempt to address and define the universal concepts of resiliency, which can be focused on the undocumented student population. According to the authors, some level of stress may be necessary for people to develop, in order to overcome the challenges they face. Considering this, undocumented students may be motivated, in part, due to their ability to overcome previous challenges such as immigration and the subsequent challenges of adapting to an entirely new environment. Further elaborating on this concept, undocumented students may actually be driven to succeed in school as a response to the very obstacles they face.

Herman, et al., (2011) explain that in some situations adverse circumstances may actually

contribute to people developing a greater sense of confidence and purpose. Therefore resilience may be demonstrated in the undocumented students' ability to make meaning out of their struggles by channeling their energy into efforts to create positive change. We see this phenomena in the many local and national movements that support changing legislation and advocate for undocumented students to pursue their dreams; movements that are created and supported by the students themselves.

However, while some stress is important for healthy development, resilience is more likely to be acquired when frequent and severe stressors can be avoided—or—when the effects are buffered by supportive relationships (Herman et al., p 263, 2011). This has critical implications for the undocumented students plight for higher education—whether that support comes from family, educators, counselors or peers it is important (if not necessary) in order for them to succeed in education. Some schools do have employees that are very supportive and understanding of the undocumented student's needs, however, currently, there are not enough of these supportive adults (College Spark, 2010). The article, “Approaching and Attending College: Anthropological and Ethnographic Accounts,” (Koyama, 2007) reviewed many studies on how American students end up in post-secondary education. The authors found that students who attended college were able to develop networks of social and cultural capital as well as positive academic identities and a sense of belonging. A strong example of how social networks can foster resilience that lead to students believing in themselves and pursuing their higher education degrees, is in the youth led, undocumented student activist movement; one of the most poignant civil rights movements of our times.

For example, Dream Activist is a national undocumented student action and resource

network, with the following mission, “DreamActivist.org is a multicultural, migrant youth-led, social media hub for the movement to pass the DREAM Act and pursue the enactment of other forms of legislation that aim to mend the broken immigration system.” (Dream Activist, 2012). A map of immigrant youth activism in the United States for the Dream Act is displayed on the Dream Activist website, depicting over seventy organizations (Dream activist, 2012) (notably this map is not a comprehensive list as many local organizations exist that focus on changing state laws as well). The Dream Activist website includes a list of eight action steps including: calling a senator to support passage of the DREAM Act and to organize by starting local student clubs to promote and pass the Dream Act, as they state, “The most important action for change comes from the grass roots.” The site also acts as a social media hub for current events effecting undocumented students, for example news stories with headlines such as, “15 Undocumented Youth and Supporters Walk to Albany,” and “Two More Undocumented Youth Arrested for Civil Disobedience” are found on the home page. This sort of organization provides a glimpse at the passion and commitment students are bringing to fight for their rights to education and citizenship.

According to testimonials from students on the Dream Activist website (2012), the movement for undocumented students encompasses more than just political activities, it also provides a place of belonging for students, a place they are encouraged to “come out” and use their voice for a cause that supports the greater good. Organizations such as Dream Activist form a central hub for students to glean information and resources on topics such as education, immigration law, housing and other practical issues that are unique to this population. Since the movement has such a stronghold it is likely that it will continue to grow as it enlightens, inspires

and motivate other undocumented students who share similar struggles. The sheer energy present in the undocumented student movement may represent the strongest demonstration of resilience. Unfortunately, without students seeking out this sort of organization or randomly coming across it, they may never connect with such a supportive community. As described in the research, shame, invisibility, stigma and fear may all contribute to undocumented students remaining disconnected from organizations such as Dream Activist that could go a long way towards sustaining hope, commitment to education and a sense of confidence that they deserve more than what is currently available.

While undocumented students and supporters advocate for much needed policy change, Arriola and Murphy (2010) address the role of educators in getting students higher education, “It is their challenge, and their responsibility, to offer realistic college options. College counselors must work together with them to arrive at the best situation possible, even if it means revising students' dreams and constructing educational work-arounds with the help of colleges and donors if possible.” (p. 27). While their emphasis on how educators and social workers can begin to address this issue is an important part of the solution, it brings up some fundamental issues that are left unexamined in the research as a whole. Should undocumented youth have to change their goals to fit into an unequal system? Is this way of addressing the issue perpetuating the problem in the first place? For instance, the authors suggest that undocumented youth take Advanced Placement (AP) classes, while this is a good suggestion to get free college credits, it may also carry the message that undocumented students should have to work harder to get what they want. Educators are in a bind, as they want to support student success but may be inadvertently perpetuating the common misnomer that undocumented students will succeed if



they just work hard enough -- implying that there is equal opportunity.

**The role of cultural values and parental sacrifices in fostering resilience.** Gallo, et al. (2009) found that people who immigrate might possess cultural values that enhance resilience in the face of adversity. Specifically they discuss how the traditional Hispanic values of “*familism and allocentrism*” emphasize strong extended family social support networks; networks that play a vital role in protecting families in the face of hardship. However, in the absence of extended family living nearby (a common experience for undocumented people), how do these values continue to serve as protective factors for students? Kao and Tienda (1995), reported immigrants (in general) tend to focus on values that promote educational achievement and family cohesiveness. A student’s resilience is greatly influenced by his or her belief in education, a belief that is often instilled and fostered by family. These articles highlight the importance of values learned in a particular cultural context and how they may serve to help students as they progress in their educations. However, caution needs to be exercised to consider the influence of traditional cultural and family values that are passed on while also considering the many other factors that make up an individual’s belief system, including the influence of mainstream culture in the United States.

Many undocumented students are bicultural, straddling the worlds between the countries they were born in and the experience of living and attending school in the United States. They are referred to in the literature as the 1.5 generation; they are not considered first-generation because they did not choose to migrate and aren’t considered second-generation because they were born and may have spent part of their childhood outside of the United States, (Gonzalez, 2009). Rodriguez & Cruz (2009) found as a protective factor that many undocumented students

have been educated in America for most, if not all of their lives, resulting in a strong command of the English language. Since students often learn the language and culture quickly, they are called upon to help their parents with adaptation and translation. Their bilingual and bicultural skills — are assets at any level — that may give them an advantage in their ability to adapt to many difficult circumstances.

The resiliency seen in the 1.5 generation may be driven by the recognition of the sacrifices that their parents made for their benefit. According to the advisor of the Washington Dream Act Coalition, the core of this parental sacrifice was the desire for quality education for their children (K. Gomes, personal communication, January 11, 2012). Juliana Aldana, an undocumented student, who was quoted in a Newsday article, speaks to this need to excel:

I've worked real hard and I feel proud at what I have accomplished, but I can't get a real job. When I want to give up, I remember my parents, who brought me here for a reason -- a decent education and a better life. (2012, March 19).

However, Gomez noted that by the time you get to the second and third generation of immigrant children, “this need to excel has greatly diminished and these children have become Americanized and have the same expectations of entitlement that we see in their peers who were born here.” Her remarks suggest that undocumented students have an intensified need to excel. She also explained that often, undocumented students have lived at or below the poverty level, and have found school to be the area where they thrive.

**The promising potential of proposed policy changes.** The article “Higher Education and Children in Immigrant Families” (Baum & Flores, 2011) studied the importance of post-secondary education for undocumented students to gain jobs and financial security. Similarly, the

article “The DREAM Act: Creating Economic Opportunities” (IPC, 2011) uses compelling arguments that passing the DREAM Act would allow for greater educational opportunities and better jobs (for undocumented students). Both articles provide a bigger picture of how policy drives the issues of immigration and education. Baum and Flores’ article differs from my topic in that it does not focus specifically on undocumented immigrants, whereas the article “The DREAM Act: Creating Economic Opportunities” hones in on this population. The articles use macro level approaches to focus on the broad reaches policy change has; citing evidence indicating that policy change is the most important part of the solution to increase college attendance among immigrant students.

The IPC (2011) article further expands their research to include not only the benefits policy change has for immigrant students (documented and undocumented) but to the American population as a whole. They cite specific facts around the financial benefits to “tax payers” (p. 1) and explicitly speak to the economic benefits of the DREAM Act, reminding readers that it would not harm American workers but help stimulate the economy and job growth. Specifically the article makes a case that passing the dream act will “...stop brain drain by allowing our most talented students to remain in the country” (p. 3), increase revenues to universities and that “...removing the uncertainty of undocumented status not only allows legalized immigrants to earn higher wages and move into higher-paying occupations, but also encourages them to invest more in their own education, open bank accounts, buy homes, and start businesses.” (p. 3). In contrast to the proposed research topic, neither this article nor Baum and Flores (2011) article is intended to speak to the individual experience of living documented, therefore do not capture the in depth, rich, emotional and personal experience of students but rather provide a big picture

look into a future of what immigration policy change could mean.

**What's missing?** There is a significant body of evidence that discusses how immigration laws create barriers for undocumented students accessing higher education (Gonzalez, 2010; College Board, 2012; Baum & Flores, 2011; IPC, 2010; Dream Activist, 2009 and 2010), however, there is limited research on how these issues personally affect students and how they cope on a daily basis, particularly after graduating from high-school. While much of the research contains suggestions about the undocumented experience, there is a need to provide more in depth information embedded in the context of the lived experience of these students. The research spans many layers of impact from the macro to the individual but does not include the actual voice and stories of the students who are living in this country undocumented, aspiring for better lives and blocked from the very mechanisms that would allow them to do that.

In order to create meaningful change their voices need to be heard, voices that all too often remain silent or ignored. Part of the intention of this research is to bridge the gap from the political to the personal by connecting the reader directly to the personal experience of students. For example, some of the research lumps undocumented students into the larger category of marginalized or minority students: although helpful in the sense of seeing this as another example of too-familiar discrimination, this does not speak directly to the unique issues specific to this population.

Another missing link in current research that necessitates this study is regarding resiliency, which Perez (2010) links to the ability of an undocumented student to thrive in school despite many barriers; however, little exploration has gone into the origins of such a show of strength. The current research focuses on the many barriers that exist for undocumented

students, particularly emphasizing the legal and systemic barriers, however, limited research has been conducted that emphasizes protective elements. There is a great imbalance in research on the many challenges students face as compared to their adaptive responses. More research focused on the positive ways students adapt to the experience of being undocumented might lead to ideas on changes that need to be addressed within the education system and community to better care for and improve the circumstances of undocumented people. For example, students' personal growth, and strength gained by coping in adverse situations and finding meaning in their situations might provide the insight needed for educators and social workers to better respond to students in similar situations that are struggling. Perhaps this kind of research requires a delicate balance of highlighting the need for large-scale systemic changes, and shifts in ideology to truly address the root causes of this issue while also acknowledging and developing on the ways students are surviving within the current system. Without this balance many students may fall through the cracks while waiting for archaic immigration laws to change. However, while the focus on resilience is an important and largely untapped part of this research it should not minimize the immense hurdles that currently exist for undocumented students in their daily lives and in pursuit of higher education.

The next section contains the Methodology of the study followed by the findings from six qualitative interviews with undocumented students. Their responses shed light on how they perceive their experience of living undocumented in this country, and how they've coped with the many barriers this has imposed on their lives as they navigate their way to higher education.

## **CHAPTER III**

### **Methodology**

The purpose of this study is to investigate the experience of undocumented students in their efforts to attain higher education. I investigated the way undocumented students cope on their pathways to higher education. I examined the unique barriers undocumented students face due to their [undocumented] status and their resiliency in overcoming or adapting to these barriers.

I researched the firsthand experiences, perspectives and insights of how undocumented students are persevering when faced with the barriers that make pursuing higher education such a challenge, such as: current laws and policies that prohibit citizenship and access to other resources (financial aid, drivers license, and legal employment), stigma and stereotypes, poverty, lack of information in the school system, and racism. I also explored the factors that helped students remain resilient in the face of these barriers such as: family support, social networks, values, and the schools responsiveness to their situations. The population under investigation was both male and female students who were undocumented and currently attending higher education or pursuing higher education. The information was obtained directly from interviewing these students.

The study was qualitative, using open-ended questions from an interview guide to gather narrative data. The decision was made to use a qualitative approach because it provides more insight on the daily struggles and resilience of undocumented students by capturing the intimate

details of their stories that might otherwise be missed. In addition, using a qualitative method gave voice to this marginalized population; helping to interrupt the system of silencing and underrepresentation that is often inflicted on people in minority groups. Gildersleve (2010) and Paris (2008) both conducted research that demonstrates the importance of using qualitative studies to capture the essence of undocumented people. This method allowed them to gather more in depth information and use the narratives of their study subjects to vividly present the themes of their findings by directly quoting their interviewees to connect the reader with the research data in a personal way.

### **Sample**

I attempted to use a snowball sampling technique to recruit participants. I researched local organizations in Colorado on the Internet that were likely working with undocumented students and contacted those organizations via email or telephone. I asked them to refer my contact information and description of research to students (if they could) who might be interested in participating—or— to refer me to other staff or organizations that might work directly with this population. Inclusion for participation in this study were the following: they are an undocumented person at least 18 years old; expected to graduate or have graduated from high school or obtained a GED and are interested in attending college, have been accepted to a college or higher education facility, or are currently attending higher education and speak English. During my initial contact with organizations I stated the purpose of my study, the credentials for participation, and inquired if they worked with students who might be interested in interviewing and provided my contact information. When potential participants contacted me either via email or telephone I explained the project, reiterated the participation requirements and

scheduled the interview.

The desired sample size for this study was twelve participants however the actual sample size was six participants due to obstacles that arose in the recruitment process. Although, I made every effort to recruit 12 participants, the challenges encountered in this process limited the sample size of my research for the following reasons: 1) Given that the focus was on undocumented students, I suspect the sensitive nature of the participants residency status made some reticent to share their stories with a stranger. 2) The limited amount of time to collect the data and recruiting in an area where I had no previous connections, made it difficult to build trusting relationships with staff members and students. I made many cold calls and sent emails to staff at various organizations who, despite my persistence in leaving messages, never responded. Also, some of the students I interviewed planned to share my information with friends who might be interested, however I did not hear back from these people. 3) The challenges of coordinating in person, hour-long interviews with students who were juggling school, working on meager wages to survive, advocating for policy change, and trying to support their families were arduous. For example, interviews were scheduled with four participants that fell through on several occasions due to their various demands; unfortunately they were not able to reschedule. 4) Organizations attempting to protect the time and privacy of the student's they were working with. For example, a staff member at one organization explained that their policy was to not ask students to participate in research outside of the organization because they already demanded a lot of their time in their activist work.

### **Ethics and Safeguards**

I exercised vigilance in maintaining confidentiality in all parts of the data collection



process due to the increased risk exposing personal information could pose for this population. Participants were recruited in an unimposing way due to my awareness of the power differentials between the researcher being in a dominant position (in regards to status and possibly race) and the subjects being in a vulnerable position. Washington (2006) exposes how dominant power structures were at play in coercing Black Americans to participate in dangerous medical experimentations, which serves as a graphic reminder of the importance of implementing ethical recruiting methods. One way I reduced this threat was by recruiting through immigrant rights organizations who worked with students who had already “come out”-- meaning they are public about their status.

The interviews were conducted in public places with private areas, for example, a study room in a public library, to protect confidentiality. The interviews were audio recorded with the consent of the participant. To ensure confidentiality per federal guidelines and the mandates of the social work profession, once recorded I transcribed the data and removed or disguised all identifying information. The interviews, transcriptions and consent forms will be kept in a secure location for a period of three years, after which time all information will be destroyed if no longer needed for research. To further safeguard confidentiality, consent forms will be stored in a separate location from the other data so there is no way they can be linked to the interviews.

At each interview, I explained the purpose of the study, the structure of the interview and the nature, benefits and risks of participation. I informed them that participation is voluntary and that all the information gathered would be held with strict measures of confidentiality per federal guidelines. I informed them that they were free to withdraw from the study at any time within two months of completing the interview and that, should they choose to withdraw, their

information would be immediately destroyed. All participants read and signed an informed consent (See Appendix A) and were provided with a copy for their records.

Participants were informed there was no financial compensation for their participation. They were informed that their participation could raise awareness and provide insight on the experience of undocumented students accessing higher education that could potentially assist social workers, educators, guidance counselors, other service providers, and community members better understand the barriers students, in their situations, face. By learning what has helped these students and what their struggles have been, social workers and other service providers who work with this population (and their families) may be able to provide better services; they may be able to reduce the barriers to higher education. They may also draw from the stories shared to enlighten, inspire and motivate other undocumented students who share similar struggles. Another benefit is that implications from this study may inform social workers and community members that this is an important social justice issue in need of policy changes. This may influence them to support current pending legislation such as the DREAM Act.

Previous qualitative research with undocumented students shows how low sample size and a long duration of time to conduct the study were critical elements in capturing the experience of undocumented students accessing higher education. For example, Gildersleve (2010) used a “life history” method in his study to demonstrate how social context influences undocumented students in their participation towards attending college. He studies four undocumented teens by conducting in depth interviews and finds “...five significant moments on a pathway to college admission before taking explicit action directed at educational access in a sixth moment.” (p. 6). He uses the information gleaned from the four students included in his

sample to write a narrative compiled of all their stories. The depth and length of his research allowed him to elaborate on the many nuances of educational expectation imposed externally and internally.

### **Data Collection Methods**

The Smith College School for Social Work Human Subject Review Committee approved this study (see Appendix D). Participants were provided with the informed consent at the face-to-face interview. In order to protect their privacy and ensure confidentiality they were asked to refrain from using names during the interview (names of people and places).

Data collection was completed by conducting in person interviews that ranged from 30 minutes to one hour and 15 minutes, depending on the length of their answers. Participants were asked open-ended questions pertaining to their experience growing up in the United States, undocumented, barriers to pursuing higher education and resiliency. Although, questions were prompted from an interview guide (See Appendix C) with 15 open ended questions, participants were encouraged to elaborate on and share the information they felt was most pertinent to their individual situation. In sharing their stories, most of the participants answered many of the questions on the interview guide without being asked directly. Depending on their situation additional follow up questions were asked including: their experiences in K-12 education, their perception of the barriers they may have faced, factors that contributed to them believing in and pursuing higher level education and their hopes and plans for the future.

### **Data Analysis**

The data were manually coded and analyzed using a content theme analysis method. The process of open coding was employed to name and categorize themes that emerged in the

research by closely examining the data and then comparing the similarities and differences.

Rubin and Babbie (2007) define open coding as “A qualitative data processing method which instead of starting out with a list of code categories derived from theory; one develops code categories through close examination of qualitative data.” (p. 290).

The next chapter contains the findings of the research study from the six qualitative interviews with undocumented students. Their responses shed light on how they perceive their experience of living undocumented in this country, and how they’ve coped with the many barriers this has imposed on their lives as they navigate their way to higher education.

## **CHAPTER IV**

### **Findings**

The purpose of this study was to explore the experience of undocumented students on their pathways to accessing higher education through examining the many obstacles they encounter and their resilience in facing these obstacles to pursue their educations. This chapter presents findings based on six interviews with undocumented students who have hopes of completing higher education. The interview questions were designed to gain the perspective of these students on the challenges they have faced and how they have coped as they attempt to pursue their educations and live in this country undocumented, without a legal pathway to citizenship.

During the interviews, participants provided demographic information including: age, sex, country of origin, level of education, employment information and current living situation. The second section of the interviews focused on the experiences of undocumented students when immigrating to and living in the United States—including psychosocial stressors. The third section of the interviews concentrated on students' experiences of being educated in the United States with an emphasis on discovering and coping with their undocumented status while navigating the American education system. The fourth section of the interviews was based on the students' perception of the limitations being undocumented imposed on their educations, as well as their perception of how this affected them psychologically, socially and politically. This section went on to address students perspectives of the resiliency factors that helped them

persevere in the face of these limitations. The data presented in this chapter are organized as follows:

- 1) Demographics, including: sex, country of origin, current location, age, amount of time living in the United States, education level and employment

- 2) The Experience and Challenges of Immigrating to and Living in the United States

Undocumented

- a) The immigration process

- b) Psychosocial stressors

- 3) Coping with the limitations on education

- a) Barriers

- b) Resiliency

## **Demographic Data**

This chapter is comprised of six responses from undocumented students who are living in the United States and have the hopes of pursuing higher education; three of the students were female and three were male. All students in this study identified Mexico as their native country. These students are currently living in central Colorado. They reported their ages as: two 18 year olds, one 20 year old, two 21 year olds and one 24 year old. The students have lived in the United States ranging from six to twenty one years.

When asked about their current level of education they shared the following: Two participants are enrolled at a community college and scheduled to start in September, one attended a semester at a state university, one attended a semester at a community college, and two are high school graduates with no post-secondary education. They described their current

employment as follows: one works as a cashier and as a lead at a fast food restaurant, one was employed as a private house cleaner and worked for free (voluntarily) as the head of a nonprofit organization. Two called themselves owners of “limited liability” companies, explaining that this was a loop hole in the law that allowed them to work (legally) as private contractors for organizations who wanted to employ them but couldn’t due to their undocumented status. One of the participants reported that he also worked at a “dead end job.” Two were not employed at the time of the interview; one interviewee explained she was attempting to get a job at a restaurant.

### **The Experience and Challenges of Immigrating to and Living in the United States**

#### **Undocumented**

**The immigration process.** Questions that were related to students’ experiences moving to the United States elicited a wide range of responses detailing their immigration stories. Some of the students spoke of not remembering the move due to their young age, while others were excited about the adventure. One participant reported feeling angry that she had to leave her friends and her life behind. Three-fourths of the participants were able to vividly recall the events that took place during and shortly after their journey to the United States. All of the interviewees reported being greatly influenced by the process of relocating to the U.S., emphasizing the significant life changes that immigration entails.

***Reasons to immigrate.*** All of the participants moved because their parents made the decision to relocate their lives to the United States. Participant one explained she found out the day before the move and despite her protests had no choice in the matter, echoing a similar theme of all the participants who came here as children through no choice of their own. The

reasons their parents chose to move varied depending on their financial situations, their family lives, where they lived in Mexico, and whom they knew in the United States. All of the students mentioned their parents desire to find work in the United States in order to escape living in extreme poverty in Mexico, participant three cited his mother's impoverished circumstances,

My mom has always been a hard worker...she made the grown up decision to quit school in the fourth grade because work was getting in the way of her studies, she comes from a family of seven siblings, you know, and all of them needed to work to feed the family and to help out and education wasn't available because it cost them money and it was like food or education, they picked food.

Participant four explained that his dad was already working in different states to make ends meet at home and was eventually able to talk his mom into coming to the US so they could live together as a family. Participant five captures a common hardship, relayed by a number of the participants, as the main reason their parents chose to immigrate, "The issue was poverty, they were dirt poor and my mom ended up having two boys there with a really abusive and selfish drunk." Participants one, three and six also reported their mothers fleeing abusive relationships as part of their decision to start a new life in the United States.

All of the students recognized their parents move as a sacrifice and desire to provide a better future for their children. Participant three notes his mother's reasons for immigrating, a theme common to all of the participants interviewed,

...when she had my older brother and me, she really realized, that if she stayed in Mexico it was going to be repeating the same fate for us, because her and my dad's incomes just weren't enough, and you know as she grew older she knew she'd have to depend on us



and she didn't want that, she said she and my dad decided, our kids needed an education and we can't really afford to go through the process, we need to leave now.

Five of the six study participants specifically identified a better education for themselves or their children as a motive their parents gave to immigrate. All of the students reflected that the work ethics and sacrifices they observed in their parents provided the primary motivation for their drive to excel in their lives as well as inspired them to succeed in school. Participant four explained, "I wasn't psyched about coming, but I can see the sacrifice my parent made for the better living of me and my brother."

***How they got here.*** The participants described varied experiences moving to the United States. Participant four explained, "the last thing I remember is me looking back in the in the mirror and crying because I didn't want to leave my house and (the rest of) my family." He was age seven when his parents were forced to move to a border town for a year while waiting to obtain a tourist VISA. Participant one explained how dramatically her life changed from one day to the next at the age of 12, after her mom revealed that they were moving permanently to the United States. Her mom obtained a permit to come for two weeks to visit her brother, who was in an accident, and then stayed, "I cried and begged but she said we have to then on the way there I became really excited, I thought, well, ya know. I mean, I tried to be positive because I knew I couldn't go back." Participant two was excited from the get go when he entered the country at age eight explaining that, "I entered the country legally, but we overstayed our visa, we left our house in Mexico and we couldn't go back, it wasn't the typical undocumented student story of crossing the border." Participant four was smuggled across the border, a lone, at the age of seven by coyotes. Her family was waiting on the other side after paying a premium to

ensure her safe crossing. The other two participants couldn't recall the experience, as they were babies when they came to the United States with their mothers and siblings. Although none of the participants reported trauma in transit to their new homes in the United States, all of the participants found that aspects of the integration process presented challenges.

**Psychosocial stressors.** Three of the interviewees named their initial entry into school as the most difficult part of adjusting to life in the United States. These three participants spoke no English when they entered school in the United States and struggled with the new environment. Participant one noted the increased stress of not knowing anyone and entering her new school feeling alone, she recalled telling her mom, "I don't want to be in this school" she couldn't understand anything and her teachers would ask her questions she couldn't answer. Participant two also described school as the hardest part of his initial adjustment, "I didn't understand the language and it was very difficult for me to adapt, umm the language was a big barrier for me." Participant four described the pressure of having to learn English, "...all I can remember is having one year to learn the whole language because I came, here and didn't speak it, nothing, so I was put into ESL (English as a Second Language) with four other kids who didn't speak much English, and that's how I started learning and when I transferred to middle school, I was placed in all English classes."

Participant one coped with the language barrier by befriending other students who were bilingual in Spanish and English and able to help her translate but felt guilty about always asking for help, "I didn't want to always be bugging them and asking them...what is he saying?" All three of the students were placed in ESL and eventually excelled, but they identified factors that made learning the language a challenge. Two of the participants were not given adequate

instruction needed to learn the language. Participant four was held back as a result of his teachers prejudice, “I got in to a bilingual class, but still my teacher was a little bias, at the time you know, I remember her saying she hated Spanish, and she never spoke it, and at the time I didn’t know that wasn’t right for a teacher to say.” Participant one was not put into ESL classes until her second year attending school. Participant one and four reported their younger siblings seemed to have an easier time adapting to school and learning the language due to their age. Two of the participants became the official translators for their households; participant three explained how this threw her and her sibling into the adult affairs of the household. “Mostly we would have to translate so we understood what was going on,”

***Facing Stigma and discriminatory policies.*** Since the major disaster of 9-11 there has been a historical shift in the attitudes and policies towards immigration. Negative media portrayal of immigrants and punitive federal policies toward immigration can have a damaging impact on undocumented students. Participant three articulated the historical shift in the attitude towards and treatment of people living in this county undocumented:

9-11 was the biggest impact on immigrants everywhere, you know a lot of people don’t understand it, but it affected the border, it affected policy, it affected the stigma of immigrants and foreigners, it really developed a huge stigma for immigrants, and that was definitely a changing point for us, it felt like a lot more policy was being derived from this hatred, you know towards foreigners, that’s when I really felt it, cuz we did start seeing the dream act and comprehensive immigration reform and anti-immigration, that’s when Bush was taking a huge stance against illegal immigration because of the route that a lot of the extremists took to get here. So that was definitely a huge change in

my life, and we did start hearing about this legislation.

He spoke of how being undocumented pushed him to focus on what was going on in the media noting the widespread damage on the reputations of the undocumented population from generalizations made by the media to the masses,

I hate the term illegal alien so much because every time you hear that, you hear something bad afterwards, you know like illegal alien drug smuggling and cartels, and you know hit and run, drunken driver, things like that, anything and everything that had to do with immigrants they had to put a label on it and sometimes even if it wasn't an undocumented immigrant they would still put that stigma, like possible or alleged, and really strong words against immigrants, that backlash from the media has really been, really horrible.

Participant five also described how negative stigmas are generalized, shaping the public opinion of undocumented people, "because there is that 1%, that one guy or woman who did something awful and you're using that as a blanket for the rest of the people."

All of the participants identified prejudice, stigma, racism, harassment and discrimination as forces that are a risk factor adversely affecting them as individuals and the undocumented population as a whole. Only one of the six participants reported experiencing direct discrimination at school but all of them emphasized a lack of awareness at the school and limited recognition of their undocumented status. They described experiencing stress and frustration over the absence of understanding (particularly in school) of their undocumented persons' circumstances. Four of the six participants detailed personal experiences of direct prejudice. Participant five pointed out, "Even among the activists you'll hear people say ridiculous things

that are racist.” Participant six gave specific examples of the ongoing harassment and police brutality her family experienced on an ongoing basis growing up, her older brother, whom they lived with was under watch by the police after committing petty crimes, at one point the police came to the house accusing the brother of having a weapon and demanded entry into the house:

They pushed him down to the ground and taized him saying that he was resisting arrest, then my mom stayed there, and said in Spanish, “this is my house, you can’t come in like that” and there was a stair, and the cop pushed her and my mom fell to the grass and he said “this is my house now beep”. They were stepping on his head and tazering him and that’s when...it was frightening to see, because they say the cops are your friends and are trying to help you, to see that, makes me say “I don’t think so” you know in elementary schools they do the fire drills, my teachers would have to pull me out because I was so scarred.

She went on to describe how their undocumented status left her family with little recourse to protect themselves, placing them under increased stress and danger. Her brother was eventually deported to Mexico for not having legal documentation.

A common theme identified by all the participants was their acute awareness that since they were not documented they were vulnerable to even minor infractions placing them at an increased risk for being detained and deported. They highlighted how this fear was a constant in their daily lives. Participant four said, “There’s risks that we have to take every single day, you just have to pray to god not to get caught in the path of someone who’s having a bad day.” Participant six describes living with this fear, “You’re always on edge and always make sure everyone in the car put their seat belts on because let’s not give them another reason to stop us,

and it's hard because I'm learning how to drive, but I can't get a license or anything." She goes on to describe the heightened impact of the decisions people who are undocumented face on a daily basis:

It's just hard working day by day and not knowing what could happen because it's not like we can go out and if we get stopped be like, who cares, it's not like well just get a ticket and have to pay it, we undocumented people, any person who is undocumented, we have to live with that fear in the back of our heads, either I could stay home or go to the grocery store, should I walk to get my son, or take my car. The way I look at it my mom cleans houses everywhere and she was lucky enough to get a social but nothing more.

Two other participants also mentioned experiencing similar fears of the dire consequences getting pulled over could have. One student spoke of how recently passed laws allow for police to ask for papers when pulling people over, making it even harder for them to get around.

Two of the six interviewees pointed out that very few undocumented people are aware of the rights they do have. Participant one explained:

I don't think a lot of people realize, what they're actually capable of doing without being in trouble or anything, because I know a lot of my friends are like "I can't say this or do this because they're gonna..." but I know there's a lot of things that we have, just because you're undocumented doesn't mean you don't have any rights.

Participant five also provided an example of the legal and financial vulnerabilities undocumented people face, "more than one attorney took advantage of my parents' ignorance of the law."

A common challenge shared by all six of the participants was financial strain due to

limited employment options. Participants six described seeing her mom work three jobs at a time to survive and recalled her mom asking her sister, “do you want to keep cleaning toilets for the rest of your life or do you want to do something else?” Participant three reflected on the hardships of working without documentation:

When we’d go get jobs we’d be working really hard jobs, we wouldn’t end up at McDonalds or KFC or something, we’d end up at a construction site, you know or you know a janitorial service, that’s just how it was; you know, instead of getting a nice part time job at McDonalds, I had to go into intense labor.

Participant four also elaborated on how the hardest jobs were left to people without documentation, “I’ve worked in roofing and plumbing, and being a laborer, landscaping, except going to the field, I’ve done it, roofing is the hardest job, working out in the hot sun, I have scars from that.” Participant three described how he and his undocumented coworker were mistreated: they didn’t receive benefits or get paid for over time, or maternity leave---his boss “literally” returned to work three weeks after having her baby because she couldn’t survive without getting paid. Participant two mentioned how he was promoted to a lead but didn’t receive the full wage because he’s not able to get his drivers license. Participant three also spoke of lack of affordable housing as an issue for the undocumented population. He said how:

At 17 I moved out because she (mom) had to move because the place we were living in was so expensive, and a lot of the metro Denver area was gentrifying and is still gentrifying, and is pushing the Latino community out, to the out skirts of Denver in to commerce city which has a huge population of Latinos

## **Coping with the Limitations on Education**

All of the participants reported that their experiences—both positive and negative—as undocumented students in the public school system shaped who they are and where they are today. They identified specific interactions with teachers, peers, counselors and parents who encouraged or discouraged their pursuit of higher education. All of the students were acutely aware of the different phases they went through as they faced the additional struggles being undocumented placed on their aspirations to get educated and pursue their desired career paths. All of the students reached a crisis point in their educations that forced them to question their own identities, come to terms with difficult aspects of the reality of their situations and reevaluate their futures.

**Barriers.** The majority of the student shared the common experience of having at least a general sense that things were different for them than for many of their peers. A feeling that often increased exponentially as they entered high school and were confronted with the challenges of not being able to get a drivers license, wondering how to pay for school, and where to go for help. Most of the students were left to internalize these experiences, as they felt uncertain of whom to trust. The isolation left these students grappling with these difficult issues alone causing their sense of self-worth to plummet. Most of the students mentioned struggling with teachers and counselors who weren't necessarily callous but just oblivious to their situations and how to help. Many of the students felt they were left in the margins not only at their school but in their communities as well. Participant five articulated this, "At times I feel invaluable, invisible and unwanted and other times where I know I am valuable and that I exist and that somebody wants me but that I'm unvalued, and people don't recognize me."



Participant three described a really good scholarship that he won; as he was completing the paperwork to pay his tuition from the scholarship he explained:

There was this one form, that I had to fill out, my residency form, which needed a social security number or else it wouldn't go through, and I was in such distress, I left the office, so angry, I went home, I tore up my room because I was just so angry at the world, and it broke me in two, I was so upset, and I hate talking about it because it just feels so raw to this day, because something you earned was just taken from you.

He went on to described the cumulative effect of multiple losses that undocumented students often face, "God and you know, just another let down, to have something dangled and then just snatched away and it's so upsetting and so degrading but you know, life goes on."

Another participant spoke of feeling very afraid all the time after Immigrations and Customs Enforcement (ICE) raided her home when she was only 10 years old, after that, "we would miss a lot of school because we didn't want to go anywhere, we were scared." She described how this and other incidents with law enforcement caused her to be aware of her family's undocumented status, she explained,

I learned right away why it was happening because my mom was blunt about it, she kind of tried to hide it, but we would ask her what was really going on and she would tell us, because we could see it, it wasn't like she could cover our eyes or anything we were right there, we couldn't go out and hide somewhere.

She described how she had nightmares and heard things after that because she was traumatized by what went on. She struggled with learning to trust people again, particularly authority figures, she summed it up by explaining, and "I didn't have the luxury to be free."

For several other students the realization of the consequences that exist for them as undocumented students came much later. One participant didn't know she was undocumented until age 17 when her parents explained she was the only in the family who was undocumented. She explained how the depression that ensued caused her to question her core beliefs about who she was and what she was capable of becoming:

“When I first found out about being undocumented I was really depressed because I saw my future as hopeless, not that there was nothing for me but that all my dreams I had been building up and that I had been told to build up (were no longer an option). So my junior year, I quit, I was attending school, but slept through all my classes, the only classes I was getting decent grades in were psychology and English, I had C minuses, all the others were Ds and Fs, everything else I was like, “I don't even care, I have no motivation so why do I care?”

She went on to discuss how her family (who are documented) grappled with feelings of guilt and remorse because they felt partially responsible for her situation.

Several of the participants discussed the divide between them and their documented peers, a world they couldn't partake in, in the same way. Participant four explained how these differences became more apparent as he entered high school, “I was a normal teenager...that changed because everyone started to get their drivers license and getting part time jobs, everybody started living the adult life, I saw they were driving around with their cars and here I was stuck walking all the time.” Realizing their situation was different (from their peers who were documented), noticing the inequities and not knowing how to cope with them was a main reason students struggled so much.

The stage of grief and loss following the students realization of how being undocumented shaped their lives was extremely difficult for most of the students interviewed. This stage of grieving did not have a definitive time frame although there was a participant who was able to adjust without significant problems, all the students had to adapt and make changes from their previous dreams and desires for college and a career, to the options that were realistically available to them. This alone was a tremendous challenge to overcome. The predominant stressors identified by the students were: financial issues (how to pay for college), relationships with teachers and counselors (who to trust), employment issues (how to get work) and ultimately how to navigate the education system as an undocumented person. Barriers to getting the help they needed were embedded in school systems that were unaware and unprepared to help. Students were not only focused on how to get to college but how to accept and make sense of the inequities of their situations.

***Risk factors in the school system.*** Barriers to getting the help they needed were embedded in school systems that were unaware and unprepared to help. In such an environment students were not only faced with how to get to college but how to accept and make sense of the inequities of their situations. All of the students identified the primary challenge, after accepting the realities of their situation, was trying to get the help they needed from their high schools. Many of the students weren't sure whom to trust to confide their status, leaving them stuck; if they revealed their status they feared negative consequences yet if they kept it hidden they couldn't access the help and support that might potentially be available. Asking about the schools responsiveness (or lack of) to the issues of being undocumented, elicited a wide range of answers, overall though, there seemed to be little to no information readily available to students

without them specifically seeking it out. Participant four described how:

At that time, there was no one I could tell or trust whatsoever about my status, even my mentor he knew or he kinda knew, he was suspect, and we keep in touch and he's still trying to help me out to get a full ride in school. But during that time there was no one who understood or knew about the situation that I and many other students I know who were my friends were going through that same situation.

Two of the students echoed similar experiences of not feeling they could trust anyone enough at the school to tell. Three of the participants identified that their counselors had no idea they were undocumented and several of the students' reported that their counselors were supportive but had no idea how to help. Participant three said:

One day she (the counselor) just asked, "Why, why are you not filling out my scholarship applications?" and "you could apply to some of these because you'd be in the running for some of these," and I just looked at her you know and kind of smirked and she just had this moment where she understood, and it was sad because it was so far beyond her at this point, and her job was just to get people to sign up for theses scholarships and to just apply and apply.

Participant three expressed his opinion that for undocumented students who don't have an accent, it's even harder for educators to recognize their situations and reach out to them.

Participant five described her counselor, who potentially could be a source of support, became a significant source of distress after misunderstanding her behavior, causing her to feel farther alienated. She described the scenario:

With the scholarship though, when my counselor was like, look...this is what's available

and I think you should apply for this one, she was just showing me my options for stuff she figured I already qualified for and stuff that she thought I should give it a shot because there's a good chance and I told her, I just lied to her because I was terrified, if I told her what was really going on, I live in such a conservative little farm town where everybody believes one thing that I just didn't know how she would react, and so I told her I didn't know what I wanted to do with myself and that I didn't like how much pressure she was putting on me and that I would prefer to just have some time to think about it and she told me that she had noticed how lazy I had been my junior year and that she was very disappointed that the trend was continuing into my senior year because I had this and that potential.

Students in schools with lower Latino/Latina populations seemed to have less help offered to them. The oldest students received the least amount of support in high school where as the youngest received the most, showing a trend of increasing attempts to reach out to students in the school system. Participants who lived in more rural environments expressed more concern about how others would react to them as opposed to students who lived in the city and attended more diverse schools. Even the youngest participants who attended a comparatively diverse and responsive school noted the shift in the atmosphere at her school didn't happen until halfway through her senior year, so although this was hopeful for future students, it didn't give her enough time to complete scholarships and meet the application deadlines for colleges.

Students not only struggled with coming out to their teachers and counselors but also faced the challenge of how they might be perceived by their peers if they came out. Two of the students expressed concern they would be judged. One student explained shame prevented him

from coming out about his status. One student struggled with telling her friends because they were worried about her but she wasn't comfortable sharing what was going on. Two participants discussed how although there were many undocumented students at their school at the time there was no culture to support them; "there was no culture about coming out and being undocumented."

Financial stress on how to fund their educations, finding scholarships and getting accurate information about what options were available were identified as obstacles that made it difficult for the students to redefine their goals in realistic terms. Frustration was expressed at how the lack of resources available and the limited information on tangible options for schooling were significant barriers to higher education. Participant two said he wasn't aware of all the options available to get a higher education, "I didn't know at the time I could apply to community colleges because my counselor was talking big colleges like everybody else who was from here." Five of the six participants described how having to pay out of state tuition prices presents a significant challenge, one the student's had to pay 20,000 for a semester of school and "I couldn't keep going because of the money," he is still working to pay off his debt. Another student talked about how he felt there was no one to go to for help connecting him with scholarships he might have been eligible for. Although he was accepted to a state university he wasn't able to attend because his parents couldn't afford it:

Two to three weeks before I actually started, my parents sat me down and they sat me in the living room and they said we got to talk to you, "You're not gonna go to college, we don't have the money for you to go." We were really low income, and my dad, during that time had just been laid off from work so there was not much money coming in. They

would of done anything but the money they were asking for, for just one semester, was \$14,000, for just being an international student because I didn't have a social security number. You have to pay three to five times more than in state tuition rates and my family does not have that kind of money to pay at once and being undocumented you don't have the option of getting FAFSA or getting many of the scholarships.

Many of the students reported being strong candidates for particular scholarships based on their academics and other achievements but then found they were ineligible because of the documentation requirements. Participant one shared:

There is this scholarship for 2011 and it pays for your whole ride to college wherever you want but I couldn't do it. I was qualified for it because you have to qualify and there's only like six people per school that qualify they said, "oh you qualified" and then we started going through the documents and you have to be documented so I couldn't do it, so that was one thing, that I was like, (sigh) seriously?

She went on to explain that not only are teachers and counselor uninformed, but her peers (other undocumented students) were operating under damaging misconceptions, such as believing they couldn't qualify for any scholarships since they were undocumented. Participant six described the extra time it took to even determine if they were eligible to apply for scholarship, she explained they'd often have to read through the fine print of an entire application to discern if documentation was a requirement.

Another theme brought up was frustration at working extremely hard in school: maintaining high GPAs, members of honor society, student body president, involved in extracurricular activities and taking Advanced Placement classes and still not being eligible for a

scholarship, unable to attend college or in some cases even get a job. Participant two captured this disappointment and the obstacles of trying to afford school:

With my education it was tough for them as well. I mean you know being a straight A student an honor student, student body president graduating and not knowing whether I was able to continue or get a job at some fast food place it was tough for them umm, especially you know with their jobs... I was writing applications to all these colleges right, like four year universities and some of them were private colleges, even though I did get accepted to two private colleges and two public universities umm you know I didn't have the chance or the money to go, because scholarships were limited to me and undocumented students. FAFSA or state or financial aid, it would be a crime for me to even fill out the application and the scholarships that are available they're very limited and incredibly competitive I mean it was very very hard, so I started thinking how do I even get to college and I started getting a little mad, because I didn't know what to do, because I got accepted to all these colleges.

Several of the students expressed frustration at working so hard with such high aspirations and then having to get a "dead end" labor intensive job, "just to pay the bills." Four of the students described having extremely marketable job skills from their experience with grassroots organizing for immigrant rights but were not able to translate their skills into paid positions because they can't get the proper documentation for employment; highlighting how not only does being undocumented bring up many obstacles in attending college but it vastly limits job opportunities as well. Participant one elaborated by saying, "finding a job, that's another thing, because I wanted to be in law enforcement and you can't be a cop because I'm



undocumented so that was another thing that I was like ohhh, ok, and another setback that I can't do." Another student explained, "One of my best friends wanted to go to the military even though I don't support war myself, I said ok, if that is what you decide, and that's what you want to do it's fine but, you know as an undocumented student he couldn't go, he was literally told you have to marry to join the military."

Another challenge for undocumented students is the push from the public schools to attend college, when current policies make college admission extremely difficult. This creates a conflict of interest because there is a distinct disconnect between what is being pushed and what is actually available to students. Their schools were very proactive about forming programs and creating classes to help prepare students for college, yet failed to specialize any of these services to meet the needs of the undocumented population. For example one participant explained,

My junior year we went to a college retreat for about four days up in the mountains. It was all about scholarships and what college life was like, so I had to ask, "what about undocumented students?" But you know and the question was asked, and you know the counselor literally said, "we shouldn't ask that question, it's a sensible question but we don't know the answer to it," but what about undocumented students? So I guess that was not an important question to them but at the time I was like, "but I need to know."

All of the participants discussed the need for a better process within the public schools to inform undocumented students of their rights and options. Participant four explained how school staff were not prepared or properly informed about the process of engaging with undocumented students or connecting them with resources. He noted how this leaves students and staff uneducated about their options for education; leaving students alone with the promise of working

hard to get to college leading to a better life yet without the means to get there.

All of the participants emphatically expressed the need for more outreach efforts in public schools. Several of the participants discussed the need to train counselors to respond to the needs of undocumented students. Participant five suggested:

It's not always that people are as callous as this particular counselor was, it's just that they don't know how to address it and don't know what they can do, so they need to know about the info that is available and where they can go and stuff like that.

**Resiliency.** There are numerous risk factors associated with living in this country undocumented and even more when attempting to pursue higher education. As reported, initially, the students interviewed had a difficult time coping with the daily stressors they encountered but eventually found ways to cope that aided in their emotional and mental health. Therefore, the intention of asking participants about protective and resiliency factors and ways they coped during this process was to elicit what keeps some students thriving when faced with constant adverse situations and threats to their futures. Participants identified a number of ways they chose to cope; initially some were in maladaptive ways and then later in healthy, adaptive and productive ways.

All of the students struggled with the inability to get the things they wanted and had worked hard for yet redefined themselves and kept going in the face of these barriers. Students were asked what kept them going in the face of these barriers, including specific questions on their connections with teachers and counselors and support at home. Ultimately it was revealed that they were able to use their primary stressors to redefine themselves in a positive light; determined to succeed, and not reduced to the limitations of their undocumented status and as

fighters working to create long-term systemic change.

At times all of the participants felt hopeless but also spoke in depth about the positive ways they coped, for example, becoming mentors, volunteering, joining activist organizations and talking to other undocumented students. Most are involved with immigrant rights activism and some want to get degrees in social services to help others who are struggling. They remain hopeful they'll eventually be able to attend college and get meaningful jobs. They are actively working on changing policies to enable them to do these goals. Some are enrolled at community colleges and others are finding creative ways to slowly piece their educations together.

Whatever their situation, they are fighting for their freedoms in their own way.

All six of the participants identified their support system as key in helping them cope with the barriers to their educations. All six of the participants explicitly identified their families—or a specific family member as a reason to stay motivated. Participants shared the following testimonies about their family support:

Participant two said:

My parents really do help me by supporting me in everything that I want to do, they're like "go for it, but yeah, family support and having a support system for yourself, having those people near you, it's always, good having people around me like my peers, I'm not just doing it for myself, I 'm doing it for them, and they also want the same thing, they want the same opportunities, so yeah, that's one of the things, that keeps me going.

According to participant three:

My family and my younger brother are pushing me to keep on fighting. I've always told him that he has to surpass me in every aspect, that he has to go above and beyond me, so

that he can do a lot better than I can. I want him to have a better life and I've made this clear every time I tell my story, that I will sacrifice my dreams and throw them out the window so that he can live his, so I wouldn't mind giving up my dreams and hopes for him and I will keep that promise...And he's living with me here in (deleted for confidentiality) with me and my wife, we put him into a charter school where he is doing great, and I'm so happy that I can inspire him to do better, because even though he fights me every day, every step of the way, I make him tag along with me, on these grass roots ventures, he's seeing why he should strive for his education and all the things I'm doing just to get back in to college. So he is another pushing force in my life.

Participant five explained:

I had some motivation from a very small little person, my niece who decided I was going to be her role model, and she was five at the time and I realized she was seeing me not try. So I knew I had to at least try, it was a pretense for her, so I smiled more and played with her, and after a while, I thought why not? If I'm already pretending to do it, why not just do it, for my sake? And her sake? I got that little last umph to prove to myself that I could pick myself back up, that even when things are really hard, you can still keep going.

Several of the participants talked about being inspired by the sacrifices their parents made for the value of their education. Participant three gave an example of this:

It comes back to my mom, my first loss was tuition equity, and it was my first real loss, and I remember being so broken and upset and I was so angry because I was there, and I was on the floor. I called my mom to tell her what happened and how upset I was, and that I needed her help, just kind of talking me through it, you know, what had happened,

and why they did that to us, and I remember she said, “You know, we’ve had so many losses in our lives from, your father leaving us, to some of the things that have happened to me, but just be proud, that what you’re doing is standing up for yourself,” because she always referred back to when she was abused by my dad or some of her employers and she said how “I came out of it with my head held high because I know, that I’m worth it, and I’m worth the time, and you’ll always see me out working and doing my job, because I’m worth the time.

Participant one described how her mom’s enthusiasm keeps her hopeful, “she (mom) always says, which I love the way she’s thinking, that the Asset Bill and the DREAM Act is gonna happen and, well, it is, I’m pretty sure, it will.” Participant six also shared that her mom encouraged her by talking to her about the DREAM Act. She went on to explain how her brother’s mistakes helped her see what is right and wrong; she felt seeing him struggle with the police stopped him from thinking he could amount to much which pushed her, “I used his situation to figure out who I am and what I want to do, so it’s because of him that I learned who I really am and that I can go far.” She also brought up an unusual source of motivation from the family members who put her and her family down, “I wanted to show them, we’re still better so I think it’s just learning how to have my own self pride and not letting something like that keep me down anymore.”

Another source of strength brought up was the social support at school including: teachers, counselors, clubs, and bonding with other students. All six of the participants mentioned how having a group of undocumented friends gave them a sense of solidarity. Two of the participants reported their primary coping mechanism was having the connection and support

of their best friends, who were also undocumented. Participant one emphasized, “I think we just need to get together and work together because my friend is undocumented, me and her are like oh look I found this I’m doing this.” Participant six said, “I know that it’s not only me living the same life, I know others are living the same things.” One participant shared how his peers boosted his spirits when they voted him in as one of the top 20 most influential people at the school.

Influential counselors and teachers were identified by five of the students as a protective factor. Participant three explained that, “this teacher he really taught me to do things like that, he taught me to open my eyes and give people a chance, because my thought when I see an anti-immigrant is to attack, attack and never listen, and these are things I definitely learned to appreciate because of my teacher.” He also described the strength of his connection with his counselor:

I didn’t have to say it but she did realize, and she almost cried, and I was like there’s no point for that, I want to figure out how to go to college, I was angry and it was one of those times that I really did talk to her, and that really sparked her, looking for scholarships for me and people in my situation, it opened up a dialogue between me and her to seek out students who needed help.

Participant one also described a teacher who pushed her in a way that helped her excel: I think the one person I remember the most, is my eighth grade teacher he was the one that would sit us down and would tell us if we tried speaking in Spanish, it’s not that he doesn’t want us to speak Spanish but he’d be like, “Hey I know you’re capable of saying that same sentence in English, so do it,” and so we would sit there and literally..., that’s

what made me get out there and be like, ok I have to be speaking in English, not because I don't want to speak Spanish but because it's going to help me.

She also explained how another teacher's response changed her perspective on what she could do:

She was totally supportive of like the DREAM Act and the Asset Bill, I was like, well I can be comfortable with me telling her, once I told her "Miss, I'm undocumented, I can't go to school." And she's like, "yeah, you can go to school." And so she helped me. And then I was like, so can I talk to my counselors about it and she's like "of course you can, they're not gonna do anything they're not gonna harm you," so I talked to my counselors, and I said "so what can I do?" and I think that's like, the people I have talked to about it, those are the main people who have informed me about what I can and can't do, and then we had an Asset Bill speaker come to our school for peace jam... and it's little bits of information I get from everywhere that are helping me out.

She also described how the school environment influenced her:

Well I think a lot of it is at the school we have, it's a small school, and we have about 600 something kids and about 400 kids out of the whole population are Hispanic so there's a lot of people I've talked to who are like look, "I don't have papers either," and I'm like, "look here's what you can do." So I think that's one of the reasons they're (the school staff) so out there about it, because they realize what's going on at our school specifically.

Two of the students mentioned finding an outlet by joining clubs at school that promote acceptance and diversity. Four of the students became activists, working to advocate for

undocumented students; participant one explained his decision to become politically active, “I knew I could make change with talking to people because I knew people would understand if you talked to them one on one.” He also noted the recognition he got in school for his activist work, “A lot of my counselors and teachers noticed what I was doing in the community, standing up for myself and all the people in my school and I would get awards for my activism.” He also described being inspired by being part of a movement:

I went to Washington DC in 2009 for the March for America and so many people were all youth they were all 18-25 year old students and they were just fighting for immigration reform and there were like 200,000 people in the mall that day, it was so amazing, to see that.

Participant five described her activist work in a non-profit she started with another undocumented student:

One of the things we do in VOICE is to talk to teachers and counselors about how to approach the issue and also what you can do about it. I know that VOICE is specifically about reaching out to the community about immigration issues and kids and that’s our main thing but if anything I would say I often use voice as a way to get into places and talk about tolerance, because being in a lot of groups at one point or another.

Participant two coped with his anger over his situation by channeling it into reaching out to the high school he attended; he outlined some of his efforts to create change:

I started volunteering more, and I started getting involved, last November we went to a national training, a national conference, The United Dream National Network and so I was elected to be one of the national coordinators for the state of Colorado, I’m talking to



other students. We have got more resources for them and more pathways (we talk about) how college can be a tangible option and (are involved in) training at universities. We have increased the options with doing a lot of work before you even graduate. So you qualify and are aware of resources like scholarships, applying to community colleges for now instead of going to big colleges which may not be tangible, realistic options, or take one or two classes at a time. So we get more students who show up to our meetings. And their even now freshmen, before it used to be seniors who were mad like me but now it's like freshman and sophomores and stuff like that and you know we advocate at the school level at the community level with the district and the state level with Colorado ASSET... and you know we didn't hold back we used our entire names with the media and you know DREAM Act at the international level so we work on different levels and it works great because we pull resources from different areas, I mean we're helping each other through that. Also, there's a lot of mentoring.

Another commonality brought up by the study participants was in how they chose to channel their feelings of anger over the perceived injustices into social activism. Participant two explained his response to his desperation as his high school graduation approached and he had no funding for college and had friends facing similar dilemmas:

I wrote a four-page letter to the president and I published it with my entire name, my photo and the school that I came from, and it was in the Sunday newspaper. You know calling out to the president that we don't have the resources, umm also calling him out for deporting undocumented students, and that is because you know he has administrative power to say stop deporting undocumented students, even if we're not offered anything,

umm, if we're DREAM eligible we have good moral character, and stop deporting us, you know? I was really a little mad. I had nothing to lose you know?

Participant six also described reaching a turning point, "I'm done being scared, I'm done being afraid, if they arrest me... (shrug)." Participant five explained how she fights for the cause so that she is doing something meaningful and not just stalling for the future:

I'm trying really hard not let it drive me crazy, trying to stop myself from getting outraged and bitter, so I do things like this, just good things, I do good things to prove to myself that the news is wrong when they say that people in my situation are a bunch of criminals who only want to feed off of the system.

She also explained the perspective she's gained from being undocumented:

For what it's done for my character and for what it's done for my future and for what I know it's gonna make me, to teach me how to be tolerant of everyone, I can say with full honesty that I'm really grateful that this is the situation that I'm in. That I'm not living the American dream that I'm not part of mainstream society and I don't mean that in the way that people who have documentation are unlucky, that's not what I'm trying to say, but I'm saying, people that don't go through any sort of, if it wasn't this, I would want it to be something else, maybe growing up extremely impoverished or maybe I don't know some other marginalized group, maybe growing up in a wheel chair, but I just feel like, if I had grown up just having everything at my fingertips, I wouldn't be who I am.

All of the students interviewed noted future changes needed to help better serve undocumented students. They discussed how their participation in influencing small changes provided them hope to continue fighting for larger scale change, participant four expressed:

I hope they will pass the Asset Bill in Colorado. In k-12, I hope there's more reaching out, go out and talk to the school boards and we get them to talk, and we ask them "what are you gonna do about it because there's a lot more like me in your schools." We got the support from the president. Yes, I still have hope, I want to become a psychiatrist or psychologist

## **Summary**

This chapter presents and summarizes the findings of six interviews with students who are 18 or older, are living in the United States undocumented, and have a goal of attending post-secondary education. Participants were asked a series of 15 questions in addition to specific follow up questions. The questions were designed to elicit the perspective of the students on how they coped with their undocumented status while navigating the American education system. Students shared their experiences about how being undocumented affected every area of their lives, and the various coping mechanisms they utilized throughout this process.

Participants were asked specific questions about their experience attending school as an undocumented student. Students shared psychosocial stressors, how they internalized these stressors and how their behavioral responses changed over time as they grappled with the issues presented as they attempted to navigate their way to higher education and a better way of life. Students emphasized how popular stigma and policies presented barriers in many areas of their lives, especially barring them from participating in numerous opportunities to get a higher education. Students also addressed their resiliency in response to the obstacles within the public education system, and changes that need to be implemented to better serve the undocumented population. The following Discussion chapter synthesizes the findings from this study with the

relevant literature. Implications of these findings and the relationship to social work practice are also explored. The Discussion chapter concludes with questions that arose from this research and suggestions on future research.

## **CHAPTER V**

### **Discussion**

The objective of this qualitative research study is to explore undocumented students perspectives of their experiences on their pathways to accessing higher education-the many obstacles they encounter and their resilience in facing these obstacles to pursue their educations. The complexities of these students' experiences—living in the United States undocumented and their process of navigating the American education system and how this shapes how they perceive themselves and their life path, were examined through the narratives of six students who were currently enrolled in higher education, or planning to attend. This chapter reviews the findings in the following order: 1) Key Findings, 2) Limitations, 3) Implications, and 4) Suggestions and Conclusion.

#### **Key Findings**

The focus of this study centered on students' perspectives of the challenges they've faced and the way they've coped as they attempt to pursue their educations and live in this country undocumented (without a legal pathway to citizenship). The stories of these students' journeys were gathered through questions pertaining to how they've coped with the adversities they've faced and their perception of the risk and resiliency factors. Students were asked how they (and their families) adapted to living as undocumented in the United States focusing on how they adjusted to and navigated the American public school system before and after discovering the implications of their undocumented status on attaining higher education. Participants were

asked questions about psychosocial and political stressors (focusing on the school setting), the internalization of these stressors and their behavioral responses over time. Specific questions were asked in regard to their resiliency in facing the barriers to higher education. They provided insight on the barriers to getting help and discussed their hopes for the future. In addition, the participants of this study, highlighted changes that need to be made to policy, within schools and communities to better care for and increase opportunity for students who are undocumented.

A significant proportion of the key findings obtained from the students' interviews were supported in the literature. However, a core difference in this study's findings are the attention to the strengths and resilience of undocumented students in facing the limitations imposed on them, compared to the majority of the literature which focused primarily on the barriers for students and emphasized external solutions such as within the school systems, public policies and state and federal laws. In addition, the open-ended question provided more insight into the everyday struggle and resilience of undocumented students, whereas the majority of the literature did not provide the same level of depth and intimacy as the findings in this study. The voices of students were incorporated as an integral part of the findings and in response to the problem of this population remaining hidden and unheard. The study participants shared experiences within their schools and the larger community that varied greatly depending on their age when they immigrated to the United States, their level of English language comprehension upon entering school, help and resources available within the schools, knowledge about the politics and policies of immigration law and significant relationship(s) with people who possessed knowledge and empathy of undocumented students.

Half of the students highlighted that arriving in the country mid school age (having had

attended some school in their native country) and not speaking any English posed as immediate risk factors for adverse mental health reactions and poor academic performance. Rodriguez & Cruz's (2009) research supported these findings; they discovered, that undocumented students who are educated in America for most, or all of their lives, have a strong command of the English language which serves as a protective factor in their overall functioning. However, according to the findings in this study, this did not appear to be a predictor of long-term consequences as these issues vastly decreased one to three years after entering school. The students who initially struggled in school reported that ESL classes, supportive teachers, and connections with other students in similar situations served as mitigating factors. A quarter of the students interviewed also suggested that the earlier you enter school the easier it is to adjust and learn English.

The Immigration journey itself was not reported as traumatizing by any of the students and they did not report physical hardship or harm coming here, rather five out of six, actually, entered the country legally and overstayed temporary visas, whereas in the literature, Paris' (2008) research paints a bleak picture of pain and desperation, in their immigration process. Rather they spoke of the difficulties trying to adapt to life in the United States as the most stressful part of the immigration process. These findings were supported by Kao and Tienda (1995) & Paris (2008) who reported on the hardships of adjusting to a new life after immigrating to the United States: finding a home, creating new social networks, and pursuing education or employment within an unfamiliar environment. Study participants added that the challenges of surviving in the current political system—where there is currently no path to citizenship—are a perpetual source of conflict in their lives (and the lives of their undocumented family members

and friends). Students further elaborated on the residual, emotional and financial stress remaining in limbo has. Not mentioned in the literature, but reported by five of the six participants was a second period of adjustment and transition in high school following the realization that they likely would not be able to attend college; that was more troubling, in their perspective, than the initial adjustment to living in the United States.

The three participants who attended school in the United States since Kindergarten reported less initial stress adjusting to school but reported similar amounts of anxiety and difficulty with adjusting to aspects of their undocumented status in high school. They supported claims in the literature by College Board (2010) that undocumented students face increased risk factors for adverse mental health reactions-- feeling left out, discouraged, angry, and isolated-- when their friends begin to apply for college. Five of the students reported similar feelings when their friends got drivers licenses. For the vast majority of the participants, high school was the first time they fully realized the consequences of being undocumented. The College Board study also reported that labels such as being referred to as “undocumented,” “illegal,” or “alien,” create separation from their peers.” (p. 9). However, while all of the participants discussed the potential harm from the implications of these labels, particularly in the media, they also noted tremendous relief and at revealing their undocumented status. In the majority of the cases, participants who selectively opened up about their undocumented status were able to receive more support.

As previously discussed in the findings, since the major disaster of 9-11 there has been a historical shift in anti-immigration sentiment and policies. According to the findings and much of the literature, negative media portrayal of immigrants and punitive federal policies toward



immigration has a damaging impact on undocumented students. Study participants described how this affected them in every capacity of their lives, especially their educations. They described how school staff were not adequately trained to talk with or help them find resources to pursue higher education. At some point all of the students reported feeling like their undocumented status went unacknowledged, therefore they did not receive the same training, validation or resources as documented students. These findings were consistent with College Board (2012) and College Spark (2010) both of whom noted the lack of awareness in schools surrounding the undocumented population despite the fact that they are engaging academically, and increasing in numbers in K-12 and higher education.

All of the students identified oppression as a force that they were (or are) subjected to in school or in other parts of their lives. One participant went into specific detail on how the police brutality her family experienced on multiple occasions was a constant source of terror in their lives. Such experiences of abuse serve to further erode the trust of students who may wish to get higher education but are wary of talking to anyone in a position of authority for fear it might negatively affect their lives. The students' reports were consistent with the literature; Koyama (2007) examined how forces of oppression operate through the school system and impact people in minority positions, finding that marginalized populations were far less likely to engage in school and attend college due to institutionalized discriminatory practices, policies and ideologies. Arriola and Murphy (2010) addressed how undocumented students internalize messages that are explicitly or implicitly negative; writings from Gonzalez (2006 & 2009); Passel (2006) and IPC (2010) documented the high dropout rates of undocumented students and highlighted the myriad of adverse factors these students were faced with which impacted their

participation in education and willingness to access services for higher education preparation. It's clear changes need to be made to protect undocumented people from such forms of institutionalized oppression.

All of the participants described feelings of shame, invisibility and stigma in response to their undocumented status. Most of them detailed the strong presence of stigma attached to undocumented people. The popular ideology that undocumented people are criminals, stealing jobs, draining resources and generally inferior was observed by all the participants. In addition, they mentioned how the media's portrayal of undocumented people perpetuates these negative stereotypes. Several participants expressed that in their efforts to raise awareness they had made strides in regard to breaking down the stigma associated with the undocumented population. The state government's response to introduce and pass state bills supporting undocumented students' rights to citizenship and education were noted by participants as important attempts to reduce the barriers and stigma inflicted on them. However, it is evident that there are still significant changes that need to be made in order to address the stigma associated with undocumented populations including personal, public and institutional perceptions.

In terms of services, the vast majority of study participants discussed how their schools did not provide many, and in most cases any, guidance, groups, classes or information specific to undocumented students, rather they reported being embedded in a system that is designed to serve documented students. Four of the six students had bad experiences at some point trying to talk to school staff about their undocumented status (i.e. insensitive counselors and teachers, and a lack of understanding how to help). They were hesitant to seek out services in school for the following reason: fear of getting in trouble, shame about their undocumented status, concerns

about the dangers of revealing their status to the wrong person, feeling uncomfortable to share in classroom settings or with peers who are primarily documented. These barriers were supported in the literature in a College Board (2010) article that explained many students do not share their status based on the fear of deportation or being treated differently. The article described how fear and invisibility can take a toll on student's mental health and academic performance. Their research also indicates that very few support groups exist to help students through these painful feelings.

A key finding to note is that research participants in schools with lower Latino/Latina populations seemed to have less help offered to them. Also, the oldest participants received the least amount of support in high school where as the youngest received the most. Although this study is far too small to generalize, perhaps it indicates a trend of increasing attempts to reach out to undocumented students in the school system. In addition, participants who lived in more rural environments expressed more concern about how others would react to them as opposed to students who lived in the city and attended more diverse (in terms of race, ethnicity and socioeconomic status) schools. However, even the youngest student who attended a comparatively diverse and responsive school noted the shift in the atmosphere at her school didn't happen until halfway through her senior year, so although this was hopeful sign of change, it didn't give her enough time to complete scholarships and meet the application deadlines for colleges. While there was much evidence in the literature citing how undocumented students are chronically underserved, there was little discussion on programs and models that are currently working to increase services to this population. Arriola and Murphy (2010) however, do address the role of educators in getting students higher education, "It is their challenge, and their

responsibility, to offer realistic college options.” (p. 27). Perhaps the research has yet to catch up with what may be a very recent shift in school awareness and programming.

Having a strong support system was identified by all of the participants as a key protective factor in helping them cope with the limitations on their educations and in other areas of their lives. Family, friends and mentors who provided connection, support, a sense of belonging and hopefulness were mentioned as crucial to their resiliency. However, it was noted by five of the six participants that they went through a period of “giving up” before they sought the comfort and help of the people who later sustained them on their paths to higher education.

Membership in groups with like-minded people (often in similar circumstances) who were advocating for the rights of undocumented students was identified as a key component in resiliency. The participants described how the connection and bond with other advocates combined with their mission of social justice were essential for them in persevering amidst the struggles of being undocumented. It’s important to note that all the students interviewed were currently or previously involved in policy work, most had participated in interviews for research or the media and engaged regularly in speaking publicly about their situations. Therefore, it’s most likely that the students willing to voice their stories were able to adapt, accept and make sense of the realities of their situation more readily and less likely that researchers would be exposed to students who had dropped out or continue to struggle. It’s also important to consider that there may be many students who wish to get involved but are not able to access the support they need. This may be driven by the fear of repercussion if they reveal their status, or students’ lack of awareness due to attending schools or living in communities with a low undocumented population. It was mentioned by one participant that initially, in an attempt to protect her, her

parents discouraged her from discussing her ethnicity with anyone outside of the family, a valid safety concern that may also contributed to students not accessing the services they need.

Another reason students may not reach out for help, as mentioned in the literature (Gonzalez, 2010) and findings, are that some may not even know they are undocumented until they apply for a drivers license or begin college preparation. Unfortunately, looking at the statistics previously mentioned, on dropout rates and post high school attendance, the students interviewed for this study were probably the exception rather than the rule.

Faith and belief in the value of education and the idea of their parents' sacrifices also helped students cope with adversity. Although Gallo, et al. (2009) focused specifically on Hispanic cultural values, their findings supported participants reports on their strong connection to family and the central role their parent(s) served in instilling a strong belief in their ability to remain resilient in the face of hardship. A predominant theme among all participants was the emphasis placed on making meaning out of short-term hardship by focusing on long-term gain.

All of the participants discussed the sacrifices their parents made to provide a better future for them as a key motivational factor. Having this sense of purpose and commitment to their families were strong determinants of resiliency over time that mitigated adverse stress and mental health reactions. Half of the participants reported making similar sacrifices for and acting as a role model to younger family members as their primary reason for continuing to excel in the face of so many barriers. Gomes (2012) supported this finding explaining her perspective that undocumented students are driven by the recognition of the sacrifices that their parents made for their benefit. She suggests that this enhanced drive to excel is lost by the second or third generation. Gonzalez (2009) refers to the unique positioning undocumented students find

themselves in as the 1.5 generation; they are often bicultural and bilingual, straddling the worlds between the countries they were born in and the experience of living and attending school in the United States. Although not all of the study participants remembered the country they immigrated from Gonzalez's concept was consistent with the findings in that all of the students had a sense of obligation to succeed that they attributed to the reasons their families immigrated (i.e. a better life, more opportunity, for the benefit of their children's education) their comments suggested a strong belief in the possibility of a better life and upward mobility; a perspective that may speak to the unique value system of many immigrants.

The majority of the participants recalled a moment where the full weight of how being undocumented was limiting their lives and creating barriers for their futures hit them. Most of the participants reported a experiencing a period of depression before they were able to regain a sense of hope and find the support and strength needed to persevere. The primary mental health and behavioral issues mentioned during this transition were: a sense of hopelessness and worthlessness, depression, anger, disappointment, drug and alcohol use, poor academic performance and sense of not being valued by society. Many reports, (Gonzalez, 2009; Gildersleve, 2010; College Spark, 2010; College Board 2012; and IPC, 2010) detail the strain of being undocumented and the challenges that arise when students are attempting to get to higher education but none highlight the distinct internal process for students that leads to a sense of heightened resilience. Students interviewed described four major aspects of change when attempting to manage the magnitude of impact being undocumented had on their lives: 1) redefining their sense of self, expectations about the future, and how to accomplish their goals; 2) managing strong emotions by finding a health outlet; 3) finding a shared sense of connection

with other people who are undocumented or struggling in other ways; and 4) creating a sense of meaning surrounding their undocumented experience by getting involved in volunteer efforts to create changes for themselves and future students.

Students described how after going through this initial crisis that caused them to question their identities, they were able to work through the feelings of being unable to relate to their documented peers and constructively channel the frustration they felt towards being scapegoated and marginalized by the larger society. One important thing to note is that through their experiences, the study participants developed a sense of heightened responsibility to educate people about what it means to be undocumented and to raise awareness on the importance of policy changes. This mission seemed to sustain students even as they face continuous sources of stress. One student cautioned though, that through his activist efforts he had seen some student activists drop out of the movement after the devastation of the Dream Act not passing, despite the strong support behind it. Specific challenges exist for activists who may be more acutely aware of the injustices they are up against and vulnerable to the losses endured when their efforts don't yield the results they've fought for.

Participants reported a tendency to exercise heightened caution in general and particularly when driving in order to protect themselves from getting into legal trouble that could place them in jeopardy of being deported. However, the students interviewed highlighted an understudied phenomenon; all of them had deliberately chosen to "come out" with their undocumented status, some more publicly than others. Despite the possibility of increased risks to their safety, the students seemed to use this as a way to take back some of the power that was lost through the silencing imposed by current politics and popular societal discourse on

undocumented students. Several of the students mentioned the concept of ‘a culture of coming out’ which promotes active self-disclosure of their undocumented status to promote public awareness of the undocumented student rights movement.

### **Limitations**

The limitations of this research were that: the sample size was small (6 participants) and, therefore, limits the generalizability of the findings; it was racially homogeneous (all six of the participants were Latino/Latina and born in Mexico); all of the participants were living in Colorado; all of the students were pursuing, had completed some or were registered to begin higher education; and although there was variance in gender and level of education, it is likely that the perspectives and experiences would have differed if the sample included students with greater diversity (in terms of location, race and desire to attend higher education). Due to the limited amount of time to conduct the research, only six participants were interviewed. Also, the need to protect their identity made this population difficult to recruit. I had planned to interview 12 participants for this study but due to the challenges which this population faces in navigating their lives between jobs, pursuing education, maintaining contacts with families back home and in trying to remain anonymous because of their status, made recruitment difficult. Additional students were recruited and scheduled to interview; however, a combination of the issues mentioned above prevented the interviews from taking place. Future research would benefit from a larger and more diverse sample size, in addition to the vital insight and perspective of students who hadn’t graduated high school.

Additionally, the interviews were conducted in a fluid format with open-ended questions, so a number of the questions were asked in a different order or not asked if they were covered



organically and different follow up questions were asked depending on the participants responses. Therefore, as this was a qualitative study, the students' interpretations of the questions, the length and the depth of their responses varied. However, the qualitative interviews allowed for rich, personal and meaningful responses. All of the study participants were forthcoming and willing to share their experiences.

It is important to mention that prior to this study I conducted similar interviews with undocumented student advocates in Washington State. As a researcher I made every effort to maintain self-awareness about my biases and observations to help me remain as objective as possible.

### **Implications and Conclusion**

Implications of this study include suggestions on programs; policies and services that students, educators, social workers and government officials can implement to better meet the needs of the undocumented population and help them advance to higher education. By researching the barriers, resiliency and coping mechanisms of undocumented students, this study could identify implications for the social work field by learning about the obstacles and gaps in the existing system and what has helped and hindered this population on their pathways to higher education. Evidence in the literature and findings implicate that there are many laws and policies, that contribute to unique psychosocial stressors the undocumented student experiences and there is a critical need to enhance outreach, education, and changes in existing policies to provide adequate services for them. Evidence from the literature and findings showing that there continues to be a high level of stigma attached to this population has implications that there is a continued need to raise awareness in the community and in schools around the realities of this

population. Implementing training practices for social workers and educators that can highlight students' barriers to accessing help, their psychosocial stressors, and ways of coping along with information on resources that are available and how to talk with these students will be a step towards better serving this specific population.

Research conducted by Gonzalez (2009) on the broken dreams of undocumented students detailed concerns regarding the student's futures. The article highlighted concerns that:

Given the numerous barriers to their continued education, and their exclusion from the legal workforce, it is not surprising that only the most highly motivated undocumented students continue on to college. Although there are no definitive figures regarding the high school dropout rates of undocumented students, it is estimated that only between 5 and 10 percent of undocumented high school graduates go to college. This leaves too many of our children cut off from any means of lifting themselves out of poverty. It makes sense to intervene when a sizable subset of our population is vulnerable and disenfranchised. (p. 21)

Social workers and educators have a unique opportunity to be a pivotal force in shaping these students' lives and futures. By intervening early on and providing support to both undocumented students and their families they can reduce the costs continuing to limit these students has on the individual and societal level. Identifying these students and reaching out to them is key in aiding them in navigating their way through the challenges of being undocumented to accessing higher education.

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## **APPENDIX A**

### **Consent Form**

Dear Participant,

My name is Kiam Parker and I am a student at Smith College School for Social Work. I am conducting a research study for my masters thesis on undocumented students in the United States, who are overcoming obstacles to access higher education. In this study, I am seeking answers to two questions: 1. What unique barriers do you face as an undocumented student? 2. What factors influenced your ability to overcome or adapt to these obstacles?

The purpose of this research study is to help social workers gain insight around the experiences of undocumented students, who pursue higher education. I also plan to raise awareness about this emergent social justice issue by presenting findings from the stories and voices of the students I interview. The information from this research may be used for presentation as well as possible publication.

My hope is to give voice to your experience as an undocumented student and to capture your perception of the struggles you faced and strengths you used to navigate the American education system in your quest for higher education. The interviews I complete with you and other participants will help social workers understand how the current education system serves undocumented students on the path to higher education.

If you choose to participate in this research, we will meet for an estimated hour-and-a-half interview in person. I will ask questions about your experiences around education, barriers

you may have faced, the strengths you've shown in overcoming these challenges and any other factors that contributed to your obtaining higher level education. The interview will begin with open ended questions about what helped and hindered your pathway to education, specific follow up questions may be asked to elicit more in depth information. As a reminder, in order to participate in this study you must be an undocumented person at least 18 years old, have graduated from high school or obtained a GED and are interested in attending college, have been accepted to a college or higher education institution, or are currently attending higher education. Also, please know that the interviews will be conducted in English. Interviews will be recorded using an audio recording device; I myself will transcribe the interviews.

I am not able to offer money to compensate you for your participation. However, one benefit you may realize is that your, and other participants', powerful stories will raise awareness for social workers that may work with educators, guidance counselors and other service providers who influence students in their preparation for higher education. Social workers and other service providers who read this study may gain valuable insight around your experience as an undocumented student and your families experience and potentially use this to improve the lives, of undocumented people they may work with.

Another benefit is that implications from this study may inform social workers that this is an important social justice issue in need of policy changes. This may influence social workers to impact policy change (either in their professional work or on their own) to support current pending legislation such as the DREAM Act. Finally, your story has the potential to enlighten, inspire and motivate other undocumented students who share similar struggles.

Strict adherence to confidentiality will be followed to keep any identifying information



about you, such as your name, protected. My thesis advisor, from Smith College, and I are the only people who will have access to the recorded interviews and transcriptions. Your name will not be recorded or used in the interviews, transcriptions or examples presented in the thesis report. I am taking these measures because I know how imperative it is to protect your identity so there is no risk that your participation can be used to identify you as undocumented to immigration authorities.

To protect your confidentiality, I will be transcribing the interviews and may also use a transcriptionist. In that case I will ask the transcriptionist to sign a confidentiality form. Names will not be included in interviews or transcriptions so these documents cannot be linked to the consent form or reveal identifying information. My thesis advisor and I are the only people who will have access to this data. In publications or presentations about this research, the information collected will be presented as part of a whole, and when quotes or examples are used they will be carefully disguised. All interviews and transcriptions will be kept in a secure location for a period of three years, as required by federal guidelines. If I need the material beyond the three-year period it will continue to be kept in a secure location and destroyed when it is no longer needed. Your signed informed consent form will be kept under lock and key for three years separate from the research transcriptions. Names will not be included in interviews or transcriptions so these documents cannot be linked to the consent form or reveal identifying information.

Participation in the study is voluntary. You may withdraw from the study at any time during the data collection process and you may refuse to answer any question. Please inform me if you decide to withdraw from the study within two months after the interviews are completed.

All materials pertaining to you will be immediately destroyed should you choose to withdraw. If you have any additional questions or choose to withdraw please contact me by emailing [kparker@smith.edu](mailto:kparker@smith.edu). Should you have any concerns about your rights or about any aspect of the study, please contact me directly or the chair of the Smith College School for Social Work Human Subject Review Committee at (413) 585-7974.

YOUR SIGNATURE INDICATES THAT YOU HAVE READ AND UNDERSTAND THE ABOVE INFORMATION AND THAT YOU HAVE HAD THE OPPORTUNITY TO ASK QUESTION ABOUT THE STUDY, YOUR PARTICIPATION AND YOUR RIGHTS AND THAT YOU AGREE TO PARTICIPATE IN THE STUDY.

Participant signature\_\_\_\_\_Date\_\_\_\_\_

Researcher signature\_\_\_\_\_Date\_\_\_\_\_

Please keep a copy of this form for your records. Thank you for your participation.

Sincerely,

Kiam Parker

## **APPENDIX B**

### **Recruitment Letter**

Dear Participant,

My name is Kiam Parker and I am a student at Smith College School for Social Work. I am conducting a research study for my masters thesis on undocumented students in the United States, who are overcoming obstacles to access higher education. I am interested in interviewing you for this research study. In this study, I am exploring answers to two questions: 1. What unique barriers do you face as an undocumented student? 2. What factors influenced your ability to overcome or adapt to these obstacles?

My goal is to interview you, and many other undocumented students, to answer these questions. The purpose of this research study is to help social workers gain insight around your experience as an undocumented student, pursuing higher education. I also hope to raise awareness about this as an emergent social justice issue by presenting your story and voice (along with the other students interviewed), of living as an undocumented student.

I invite you to participate in this study if you are an undocumented student at least 18 years old, have graduated from high school or obtained a General Education Degree and are interested in attending college, have been accepted to a college or higher education facility, or are currently attending higher education. Please know that interviews will be conducted in English.

I became passionate about this issue while volunteering with the Washington Dream Act Coalition. This nonprofit was led and organized by a group of undocumented students, committed to raising awareness and passing the DREAM Act. I heard stories of struggle and hope from the many undocumented students involved in the organization. Despite many challenges, these students persevere and fight for the right to pursue their dreams. Their experiences inspire me to continue working on this cause by making it the topic of my master's thesis.

I invite you to participate by sharing your story. Interviews will be confidential and there will be no risk that your participation can be used to identify you as undocumented to immigration authorities. I hope to collaborate with you on this project and look forward to answering any inquires you may have. If you're interested, please contact me directly by phone or email. Thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely,

Kiam Parker

## **APPENDIX C**

### **Interview Guide**

1. How old were you when you came to the United States and where were you coming from?
2. What is your and your family's experience like living in the United States so far?
3. How have you and your family's lives been impacted by being undocumented in this country?
4. What has your experience been like getting to higher education?
5. What are your current aspirations for your education and career?
6. Do you feel there are barriers to achieve your aspirations? If so, please elaborate.
7. What grade are you in, in school?
8. What strengths did you find helped you internally in accessing higher education?
9. Who helped you on your path to higher education?
10. What resources helped you in your pursuit of higher education?
11. Did you receive financial aid including scholarships? How are you paying for school?
12. What changes would you like to see take place in US immigration laws and in k12 and higher education policies?
13. What other changes might help you and other undocumented students?
14. What should people that support immigration reform but are not undocumented know?
15. What else would you like to share? Did I miss anything?

## APPENDIX D

### HSR Approval Letter



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School for Social Work  
Smith College  
Northampton, Massachusetts 01063  
T (413) 585-7950 F (413) 585-7994

February 6, 2012

Kiam Parker

Dear Kiam,

The requested revisions to your Human Subjects Review application have been reviewed and are approved. Nice work and professional response, thank you.

*Please note the following requirements:*

**Consent Forms:** All subjects should be given a copy of the consent form.

**Maintaining Data:** You must retain all data and other documents for at least three (3) years past completion of the research activity.

*In addition, these requirements may also be applicable:*

**Amendments:** If you wish to change any aspect of the study (such as design, procedures, consent forms or subject population), please submit these changes to the Committee.

**Renewal:** You are required to apply for renewal of approval every year for as long as the study is active.

**Completion:** You are required to notify the Chair of the Human Subjects Review Committee when your study is completed (data collection finished). This requirement is met by completion of the thesis project during the Third Summer.

Good luck on your research project.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "David L. Burton". The signature is written in a cursive style with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

David L. Burton, M.S.W., Ph.D.  
Chair, Human Subjects Review Committee

CC: Andrew Jilani, Research Advisor